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WIVES AND DAUGHTERS.

AN EVERY-DAY STORY.

BY

MRS. GASKELL,

AUTHOR OF "MARY BARTON," "RUTH," ETC. ETC.

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WIVES AND DAUGHTERS.

AN EVERY-DAY STORY.

CHAPTER I.

The Dawn of a Gala Day.

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room; a certain Betty, whose slumbers must not be disturbed until six o'clock struck, when she wakened of herself "as sure as clockwork," and left the household very little peace afterwards. It was a June morning, and early as it was, the room was full of sunny warmth and light.

On the drawers opposite to the little white dimity bed in which Molly Gibson lay, was a primitive kind of bonnet-stand on which was hung a bonnet, carefully covered over from any chance of dust with a large cotton handkerchief; of so heavy and serviceable a texture that if the thing underneath it had been a flimsy fabric

of gauze and lace and flowers, it would have been altogether "scomfished" (again to quote from Betty's vocabulary). But the bonnet was made of solid straw, and its only trimming was a plain white ribbon put over the crown, and forming the strings. Still, there was a neat little quilling inside, every plait of which Molly knew, for had she not made it herself the evening before, with infinite pains? and was there not a little blue bow in this quilling, the very first bit of such finery Molly had ever had the prospect of wearing?

Six o'clock now! the pleasant, brisk ringing of the church bells told that; calling every one to their daily work, as they had done for hundreds of years. Up jumped Molly, and ran with her bare little feet across the room, and lifted off the handkerchief and saw once again the bonnet; the pledge of the gay bright day to come. Then to the window, and after some tugging she opened the casement, and let in the sweet morning air. The dew was already off the flowers in the garden below, but still rising from the long hay-grass in the meadows directly beyond. At one side lay the little town of Hollingford, into a street of which Mr. Gibson's front door opened; and delicate columns, and little puffs of smoke were already beginning to rise from many a cottage chimney where some housewife was already up, and preparing breakfast for the bread-winner of the family.

Molly Gibson saw all this, but all she thought about it was, "Oh! it will be a fine day! I was afraid it never, never would come; or that, if it ever came, it would be a rainy day!" Five-and-forty years ago, children's pleasures in a country town were very simple, and Molly had lived for twelve long years without the

occurrence of any event so great as that which was now impending. Poor child! it is true that she had lost her mother, which was a jar to the whole tenour of her life; but that was hardly an event in the sense referred to; and besides, she had been too young to be conscious of it at the time. The pleasure she was looking forward to to-day was her first share in a kind of annual festival in Hollingford.

The little straggling town faded away into country on one side close to the entrance-lodge of a great park, where lived my Lord and Lady Cumnor: "the earl" and "the countess," as they were always called by the inhabitants of the town; where a very pretty amount of feudal feeling still lingered, and showed itself in a number of simple ways, droll enough to look back upon, but serious matters of importance at the time. It was before the passing of the Reform Bill, but a good deal of liberal talk took place occasionally between two or three of the more enlightened freeholders living in Hollingford; and there was a great Whig family in the county who, from time to time, came forward and contested the election with the rival Tory family of Cumnor. One would have thought that the above-mentioned liberal-talking inhabitants of Hollingford would have, at least, admitted the possibility of their voting for the Hely-Harrison who represented their own opinions. But no such thing. "The earl" was lord of the manor, and owner of much of the land on which Hollingford was built; he and his household were fed, and doctored, and, to a certain measure, clothed by the good people of the town; their fathers' grandfathers had always voted for the eldest son of Cumnor Towers, and following in the ancestral track, every man-jack in the

place gave his vote to the liege lord, totally irrespective of such chimeras as political opinion.

This was no unusual instance of the influence of the great landowners over humbler neighbours in those days before railways, and it was well for a place where the powerful family, who thus overshadowed it, were of so respectable a character as the Cumnors. They expected to be submitted to, and obeyed; the simple worship of the towns-people was accepted by the earl and countess as a right; and they would have stood still in amazement, and with a horrid memory of the French sansculottes who were the bugbears of their youth, had any inhabitant of Hollingford ventured to set his will or opinions in opposition to those of the earl. But, yielded all that obeisance, they did a good deal for the town, and were generally condescending, and often thoughtful and kind in their treatment of their vassals. Lord Cumnor was a forbearing landlord; putting his steward a little on one side sometimes, and taking the reins into his own hands now and then, much to the annoyance of the agent, who was, in fact, too rich and independent to care greatly for preserving a post where his decisions might any day be overturned by my lord's taking a fancy to go "pottering" (as the agent irreverently expressed it in the sanctuary of his own home), which, being interpreted, meant that occasionally the earl asked his own questions of his own tenants, and used his own eyes and ears in the management of the smaller details of his property. But his tenants liked my lord all the better for this habit of his. Lord Cumnor had certainly a little time for gossip, which he contrived to combine with the failing of personal intervention between the old land-steward

and the tenantry. But, then, the countess made up by her unapproachable dignity for this weakness of the earl's. Once a year she was condescending. She and the ladies, her daughters, had set up a school; not a school after the manner of schools now-a-days, where far better intellectual teaching is given to the boys and girls of labourers and work-people than often falls to the lot of their betters in worldly estate; but a school of the kind we should call "industrial," where girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and, above all, to dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers; — white caps, white tippets, check aprons, blue gowns, and ready curtseys, and "please, ma'ams," being *de rigueur*.

Now, as the countess was absent from the Towers for a considerable part of the year, she was glad to enlist the sympathy of the Hollingford ladies in this school, with a view to obtaining their aid as visitors during the many months that she and her daughters were away. And the various unoccupied gentlewomen of the town responded to the call of their liege lady, and gave her their service as required; and along with it, a great deal of whispered and fussy admiration. "How good of the countess! So like the dear countess — always thinking of others!" and so on; while it was always supposed that no strangers had seen Hollingford properly, unless they had been taken to the countess's school, and been duly impressed by the neat little pupils, and the still neater needlework there to be inspected. In return, there was a day of honour set apart every summer, when with much gracious and stately hospitality, Lady Cumnor and her daughters

received all the school visitors at the Towers, the great family mansion standing in aristocratic seclusion in the centre of the large park, of which one of the lodges was close to the little town. The order of this annual festivity was this. About ten o'clock one of the Towers' carriages rolled through the lodge, and drove to different houses, wherein dwelt a woman to be honoured; picking them up by ones or twos, till the loaded carriage drove back again through the ready portals, bowled along the smooth tree-shaded road, and deposited its covey of smartly-dressed ladies on the great flight of steps leading to the ponderous doors of Cumnor Towers. Back again to the town; another picking up of womankind in their best clothes, and another return, and so on till the whole party were assembled either in the house or in the really beautiful gardens. After the proper amount of exhibiton on the one part, and admiration on the other, had been done, there was a collation for the visitors, and some more display and admiration of the treasures inside the house. Towards four o'clock, coffee was brought round; and this was a signal of the approaching carriage that was to take them back to their own homes; whither they returned with the happy consciousness of a well-spent day, but with some fatigue at the long-continued exertion of behaving their best, and talking on stilts for so many hours. Nor were Lady Cumnor and her daughters free from something of the same self-approbation, and something, too, of the same fatigue; the fatigue that always follows on conscious efforts to behave as will best please the society you are in.

For the first time in her life, Molly Gibson was to be included among the guests at the Towers. She was

much too young to be a visitor at the school, so it was not on that account that she was to go; but it had so happened that one day when Lord Cumnor was on a "pottering" expedition, he had met Mr. Gibson, *the* doctor of the neighbourhood, coming out of the farm-house my lord was entering; and having some small question to ask the surgeon (Lord Cumnor seldom passed any one of his acquaintance without asking a question of some sort — not always attending to the answer; it was his mode of conversation), he accompanied Mr. Gibson to the out-building, to a ring in the wall of which the surgeon's horse was fastened. Molly was there too, sitting square and quiet on her rough little pony, waiting for her father. Her grave eyes opened large and wide at the close neighbourhood and evident advance of "the earl;" for to her little imagination the grey-haired, red-faced, somewhat clumsy man, was a cross between an archangel and a king.

"Your daughter, eh, Gibson? — nice little girl, how old? Pony wants grooming though," patting it as he talked. "What's your name, my dear? He is sadly behindhand with his rent, as I was saying, but if he is really ill, I must see after Sheepshanks, who is a hardish man of business. What's his complaint? You'll come to our school-scrimmage on Thursday, little girl — what's-your-name? Mind you send her, or bring her, Gibson; and just give a word to your groom, for I'm sure that pony was not singed last year, now, was he? Don't forget Thursday, little girl — what's-your-name? — it's a promise between us, is it not?" And off the earl trotted, attracted by the sight of the farmer's eldest son on the other side of the yard.

Mr. Gibson mounted, and he and Molly rode off. They did not speak for some time. Then she said, "May I go, papa?" in rather an anxious little tone of voice.

"Where, my dear?" said he, wakening up out of his own professional thoughts.

"To the Towers — on Thursday, you know. That gentleman" (she was shy of calling him by his title), "asked me."

"Would you like it, my dear? It has always seemed to me rather a tiresome piece of gaiety — rather a tiring day, I mean — beginning so early — and the heat, and all that."

"Oh, papa!" said Molly reproachfully.

"You'd like to go then, would you?"

"Yes; if I may! — He asked me, you know. Don't you think I may? — he asked me twice over."

"Well! we'll see — yes! I think we can manage it, if you wish it so much, Molly."

Then they were silent again. By-and-by, Molly said, —

"Please, papa — I do wish to go, — but I don't care about it."

"That's rather a puzzling speech. But I suppose you mean you don't care to go, if it will be any trouble to get you there. I can easily manage it, however, so you may consider it settled. You'll want a white frock, remember; you'd better tell Betty you're going, and she'll see after making you tidy."

Now, there were two or three things to be done by Mr. Gibson, before he could feel quite comfortable about Molly's going to the festival at the Towers, and each of them involved a little trouble on his part.

But he was very willing to gratify his little girl; so the next day he rode over to the Towers, ostensibly to visit some sick housemaid, but, in reality, to throw himself in my lady's way, and get her to ratify Lord Cumnor's invitation to Molly. He chose his time, with a little natural diplomacy; which, indeed, he had often to exercise in his intercourse with the great family. He rode into the stable-yard about twelve o'clock, a little before luncheon-time, and yet after the worry of opening the post-bag and discussing its contents was over. After he had put up his horse, he went in by the back-way to the house; the "House" on this side, the "Towers" at the front. He saw his patient, gave his directions to the housekeeper, and then went out, with a rare wild-flower in his hand, to find one of the ladies Tranmere in the garden, where, according to his hope and calculation, he came upon Lady Cumnor too, — now talking to her daughter about the contents of an open letter which she held in her hand, now directing a gardener about certain bedding-out plants.

"I was calling to see Nanny, and I took the opportunity of bringing Lady Agnes the plant I was telling her about as growing on Cumnor Moss."

"Thank you, so much, Mr. Gibson. Mamma, look! this is the *Drosera rotundifolia* I have been wanting so long."

"Ah! yes; very pretty I daresay, only I am no botanist. Nanny is better, I hope? We can't have any one laid up next week, for the house will be quite full of people, — and here are the Danbys waiting to offer themselves as well. One comes down for a fortnight of quiet, at Whitsuntide, and leaves half one's establishment in town, and as soon as people know of

our being here, we get letters without end, longing for a breath of country air, or saying how lovely the Towers must look in spring; and I must own, Lord Cumnor is a great deal to blame for it all, for as soon as ever we are down here, he rides about to all the neighbours, and invites them to come over and spend a few days."

"We shall go back to town on Friday the 18th," said Lady Agnes, in a consolatory tone.

"Ah, yes! as soon as we have got over the school visitors' affair. But it is a week to that happy day."

"By the way!" said Mr. Gibson, availing himself of the good opening thus presented, "I met my lord at the Cross-trees Farm yesterday, and he was kind enough to ask my little daughter, who was with me, to be one of the party here on Thursday; it would give the lassie great pleasure, I believe." He paused for Lady Cumnor to speak.

"Oh, well! if my lord asked her, I suppose she must come, but I wish he was not so amazingly hospitable! Not but what the little girl will be quite welcome; only, you see, he met a younger Miss Browning the other day, of whose existence I had never heard."

"She visits at the school, mamma," said Lady Agnes.

"Well, perhaps she does; I never said she did not. I knew there was one visitor of the name of Browning; I never knew there were two, but, of course, as soon as Lord Cumnor heard there was another, he must needs ask her; so the carriage will have to go backwards and forwards four times now to fetch them all. So your daughter can come quite easily, Mr. Gibson, and I shall be very glad to see her for your sake. She

can sit bodkin with the Brownings, I suppose? You'll arrange it all with them; and mind you get Nanny well up to her work next week."

Just as Mr. Gibson was going away, Lady Cumnor called after him, "Oh! by-the-by, Clare is here; you remember Clare, don't you? She was a patient of yours, long ago."

"Clare," he repeated, in a bewildered tone.

"Don't you recollect her? Miss Clare, our old governess," said Lady Agnes. "About twelve or fourteen years ago, before Lady Cuxhaven was married."

"Oh, yes!" said he. "Miss Clare, who had the scarlet fever here; a very pretty delicate girl. But I thought she was married!"

"Yes!" said Lady Cumnor. "She was a silly little thing, and did not know when she was well off; we were all very fond of her, I'm sure. She went and married a poor curate, and became a stupid Mrs. Kirkpatrick: but we always kept on calling her 'Clare.' And now he's dead, and left her a widow, and she is staying here; and we are racking our brains to find out some way of helping her to a livelihood without parting her from her child. She's somewhere about the grounds, if you like to renew your acquaintance with her."

"Thank you, my lady. I am afraid I cannot stop to-day. I have a long round to go; I have stayed here too long as it is, I am afraid."

Long as his ride had been that day, he called on the Miss Brownings in the evening, to arrange about Molly's accompanying them to the Towers. They were tall handsome women, past their first youth, and inclined to be extremely complaisant to the widowed doctor.

"Eh dear! Mr. Gibson, but we shall be delighted to have her with us. You should never have thought of asking us such a thing," said Miss Browning the elder.

"I'm sure I'm hardly sleeping at nights for thinking of it," said Miss Phœbe. "You know I've never been there before. Sister has many a time; but somehow, though my name has been down on the visitors' list these three years, the countess has never named me in her note; and you know I could not push myself into notice, and go to such a grand place without being asked; how could I?"

"I told Phœbe last year," said her sister, "that I was sure it was only inadvertence, as one may call it, on the part of the countess, and that her ladyship would be as hurt as any one when she did not see Phœbe among the school visitors; but Phœbe has got a delicate mind, you see, Mr. Gibson, and all I could say she would not go, but stopped here at home; and it spoilt all my pleasure all that day, I do assure you, to think of Phœbe's face, as I saw it over the window-blinds, as I rode away; her eyes were full of tears, if you'll believe me."

"I had a good cry after you was gone, Sally," said Miss Phœbe; "but for all that I think I was right in stopping away from where I was not asked. Don't you, Mr. Gibson?"

"Certainly," said he. "And you see you are going this year; and last year it rained."

"Yes! I remember! I set myself to tidy my drawers, to string myself up, as it were; and I was so taken up with what I was about that I was quite startled when I heard the rain beating against the window-panes.

'Goodness me!' said I to myself, 'whatever will become of sister's white satin shoes, if she has to walk about on soppy grass after such rain as this?' for, you see, I thought a deal about her having a pair of smart shoes; and this year she has gone and got me a white satin pair just as smart as hers, for a surprise."

"Molly will know she's to put on her best clothes," said Miss Browning. "We could perhaps lend her a few beads, or artificials, if she wants them."

"Molly must go in a clean white frock," said Mr. Gibson, rather hastily; for he did not admire the Miss Brownings' taste in dress, and was unwilling to have his child decked up according to their fancy; he esteemed his old servant Betty's as the more correct, because the more simple. Miss Browning had just a shade of annoyance in her tone as she drew herself up, and said, "Oh! very well. It's quite right, I'm sure." But Miss Phœbe said, "Molly will look very nice in whatever she puts on, that's certain."

CHAPTER II.

A Novice amongst the Great Folk.

At ten o'clock on the eventful Thursday the Towers' carriage began its work. Molly was ready long before it made its first appearance, although it had been settled that she and the Miss Brownings were not to go until the last, or fourth, time of its coming. Her face had been soaped, scrubbed, and shone brilliantly clean; her frills, her frock, her ribbons were all snow-white. She had on a black mode cloak that had been her mother's; it was trimmed round with rich lace, and looked quaint and old-fashioned on the child. For the first time in her life she wore kid gloves; hitherto she had only had cotton ones. Her gloves were far too large for the little dimpled fingers, but as Betty had told her they were to last her for years, it was all very well. She trembled many a time, and almost turned faint once with the long expectation of the morning. Betty might say what she liked about a watched pot never boiling; Molly never ceased to watch the approach through the winding street, and after two hours the carriage came for her at last. She had to sit very forward to avoid crushing the Miss Brownings' new dresses; and yet not too forward, for fear of incommoding fat Mrs. Goodenough and her niece, who occupied the front seat of the carriage; so that altogether the fact of sitting down at all was rather doubtful, and to add to her discomfort, Molly felt herself to be very conspicuously

placed in the centre of the carriage, a mark for all the observation of Hollingford. It was far too much of a gala day for the work of the little town to go forward with its usual regularity. Maid-servants gazed out of upper windows; shopkeepers' wives stood on the door-steps; cottagers ran out, with babies in their arms; and little children, too young to know how to behave respectfully at the sight of an earl's carriage, huzzaed merrily as it bowled along. The woman at the lodge held the gate open, and dropped a low curtsey to the liveries. And now they were in the Park; and now they were in sight of the Towers, and silence fell upon the carriage-full of ladies, only broken by one faint remark from Mrs. Goodenough's niece, a stranger to the town, as they drew up before the double semicircle flight of steps which led to the door of the mansion.

"They call that a perron, I believe, don't they?" she asked. But the only answer she obtained was a simultaneous "hush." It was very awful, as Molly thought, and she half wished herself at home again. But she lost all consciousness of herself by-and-by when the party strolled out into the beautiful grounds, the like of which she had never even imagined. Green velvet lawns, bathed in sunshine, stretched away on every side into the finely wooded park; if there were divisions and ha-has between the soft sunny sweeps of grass, and the dark gloom of the forest-trees beyond, Molly did not see them; and the melting away of exquisite cultivation into the wilderness had an inexplicable charm to her. Near the house there were walls and fences; but they were covered with climbing roses, and rare honeysuckles and other creepers just bursting into bloom. There were flower-beds, too,

scarlet, crimson, blue, orange; masses of blossom lying on the greensward. Molly held Miss Browning's hand very tight as they loitered about in company with several other ladies, and marshalled by a daughter of the Towers, who seemed half amused at the voluble admiration showered down upon every possible thing and place. Molly said nothing, as became her age and position, but every now and then she relieved her full heart by drawing a deep breath, almost like a sigh. Presently they came to the long glittering range of greenhouses and hothouses, and an attendant gardener was there to admit the party. Molly did not care for this half so much as for the flowers in the open air; but Lady Agnes had a more scientific taste, she expatiated on the rarity of this plant, and the mode of cultivation required by that, till Molly began to feel very tired, and then very faint. She was too shy to speak for some time; but at length, afraid of making a greater sensation if she began to cry, or if she fell against the stands of precious flowers, she caught at Miss Browning's hand, and gasped out —

"May I go back, out into the garden? I can't breathe here!"

"Oh, yes, to be sure, love. I daresay it's hard understanding for you, love; but it's very fine and instructive, and a deal of Latin in it too."

She turned hastily round not to lose another word of Lady Agnes' lecture on orchids, and Molly turned back and passed out of the heated atmosphere. She felt better in the fresh air; and unobserved, and at liberty, went from one lovely spot to another, now in the open park, now in some shut-in flower-garden, where the song of the birds, and the drip of the central

fountain, were the only sounds, and the tree-tops made an enclosing circle in the blue June sky; she went along without more thought as to her whereabouts than a butterfly has, as it skims from flower to flower, till at length she grew very weary, and wished to return to the house, but did not know how, and felt afraid of encountering all the strangers who would be there, unprotected by either of the Miss Brownings. The hot sun told upon her head, and it began to ache. She saw a great wide-spreading cedar-tree upon a burst of lawn towards which she was advancing, and the black repose beneath its branches lured her thither. There was a rustic seat in the shadow, and weary Molly sate down there, and presently fell asleep.

She was startled from her slumbers after a time, and jumped to her feet. Two ladies were standing by her, talking about her. They were perfect strangers to her, and with a vague conviction that she had done something wrong, and also because she was worn-out with hunger, fatigue, and the morning's excitement, she began to cry.

"Poor little woman! She has lost herself; she belongs to some of the people from Hollingford, I have no doubt," said the oldest-looking of the two ladies; she who appeared to be about forty, though she did not really number more than thirty years. She was plain-featured, and had rather a severe expression on her face; her dress was as rich as any morning dress could be; her voice deep and unmodulated, — what in a lower rank of life would have been called gruff; but that was not a word to apply to Lady Cuxhaven, the eldest daughter of the earl and countess. The other lady looked much younger, but she was in fact some

years the elder; at first sight Molly thought she was the most beautiful person she had ever seen, and she was certainly a very lovely woman. Her voice, too, was soft and plaintive, as she replied to Lady Cuxhaven, —

"Poor little darling! she is overcome by the heat, I have no doubt — such a heavy straw bonnet, too. Let me untie it for you, my dear."

"Molly now found voice to say — "I am Molly Gibson, please. I came here with Miss Brownings;" for her great fear was that she should be taken for an unauthorized intruder.

"Miss Brownings?" said Lady Cuxhaven to her companion, as if inquiringly.

"I think they were the two tall large young women that Lady Agnes was talking about."

"Oh, I daresay. I saw she had a number of people in tow;" then looking again at Molly, she said, "Have you had anything to eat, child, since you came? You look a very white little thing; or is it the heat?"

"I have had nothing to eat," said Molly, rather piteously; for, indeed, before she fell asleep she had been very hungry.

The two ladies spoke to each other in a low voice; then the elder said in a voice of authority, which, indeed, she had always used in speaking to the other, "Sit still here, my dear; we are going to the house, and Clare shall bring you something to eat before you try to walk back; it must be a quarter of a mile at least." So they went away, and Molly sat upright, waiting for the promised messenger. She did not know who Clare might be, and she did not care much for food now; but she felt as if she could not walk without

some help. At length she saw the pretty lady coming back, followed by a footman with a small tray.

"Look how kind Lady Cuxhaven is," said she who was called Clare. "She chose you out this little lunch herself; and now you must try and eat it, and you'll be quite right when you've had some food, darling — You need not stop, Edwards; I will bring the tray back with me."

There was some bread, and some cold chicken, and some jelly, and a glass of wine, and a bottle of sparkling water, and a bunch of grapes. Molly put out her trembling little hand for the water; but she was too faint to hold it. Clare put it to her mouth, and she took a long draught and was refreshed. But she could not eat; she tried, but she could not; her headache was too bad. Clare looked bewildered. "Take some grapes, they will be the best for you; you must try and eat something, or I don't know how I shall get you to the house."

"My head aches so," said Molly, lifting her heavy eyes wistfully.

"Oh, dear, how tiresome!" said Clare, still in her sweet gentle voice, not at all as if she was angry, only expressing an obvious truth. Molly felt very guilty and very unhappy. Clare went on, with a shade of asperity in her tone: "You see, I don't know what to do with you here if you don't eat enough to enable you to walk home. And I've been out for these three hours trapesing about the grounds till I'm as tired as can be, and missed my lunch and all." Then, as if a new idea had struck her, she said, — "You lie back in that seat for a few minutes, and try to eat the bunch of grapes, and I'll wait for you, and just be eating a

mouthful meanwhile. You are sure you don't want this chicken?"

Molly did as she was bid, and leant back, picking languidly at the grapes, and watching the good appetite with which the lady ate up the chicken and jelly, and drank the glass of wine. She was so pretty and so graceful in her deep mourning, that even her hurry in eating, as if she was afraid of some one coming to surprise her in the act, did not keep her little observer from admiring her in all she did.

"And now, darling, are you ready to go?" said she, when she had eaten up everything on the tray. "Oh, come; you have nearly finished your grapes; that's a good girl. Now, if you will come with me to the side entrance, I will take you up to my own room, and you shall lie down on the bed for an hour or two; and if you have a good nap your headache will be quite gone."

So they set off, Clare carrying the empty tray, rather to Molly's shame; but the child had enough work to drag herself along, and was afraid of offering to do anything more. The "side entrance" was a flight of steps leading up from a private flower-garden into a private matted hall, or ante-room, out of which many doors opened, and in which were deposited the light garden-tools and the bows and arrows of the young ladies of the house. Lady Cuxhaven must have seen their approach, for she met them in this hall as soon as they came in.

"How is she now?" she asked; then glancing at the plates and glasses, she added, "Come, I think there can't be much amiss! You're a good old Clare, but you should have let one of the men fetch that tray

in; life in such weather as this is trouble enough of itself."

Molly could not help wishing that her pretty companion would have told Lady Cuxhaven that she herself had helped to finish up the ample luncheon; but no such idea seemed to come into her mind. She only said,—"Poor dear! she is not quite the thing yet; has got a headache, she says. I am going to put her down on my bed, to see if she can get a little sleep."

Molly saw Lady Cuxhaven say something in a half-laughing manner to "Clare," as she passed her; and the child could not keep from tormenting herself by fancying that the words spoken sounded wonderfully like "Over-eaten herself, I suspect." However, she felt too poorly to worry herself long; the little white bed in the cool and pretty room had too many attractions for her aching head. The muslin curtains flapped softly from time to time in the scented air that came through the open windows. Clare covered her up with a light shawl, and darkened the room. As she was going away Molly roused herself to say, "Please, ma'am, don't let them go away without me. Please ask somebody to waken me if I go to sleep. I am to go back with Miss Brownings."

"Don't trouble yourself about it, dear; I'll take care," said Clare, turning round at the door, and kissing her hand to little anxious Molly. And then she went away, and thought no more about it. The carriages came round at half-past four, hurried a little by Lady Cumnor, who had suddenly become tired of the business of entertaining, and annoyed at the repetition of indiscriminating admiration.

"Why not have both carriages out, mamma, and

get rid of them all at once?" said Lady Cuxhaven. "This going by instalments is the most tiresome thing that could be imagined." So at last there had been a great hurry and an unmethodical way of packing off every one at once. Miss Browning had gone in the chariot (or "chawyot," as Lady Cumnor called it; — it rhymed to her daughter, Lady Hawyot — or Hartiet, as the name was spelt in the *Peerage*), and Miss Phœbe had been speeded along with several other guests, away in a great roomy family conveyance, of the kind which we should now call an "omnibus." Each thought that Molly Gibson was with the other, and the truth was, that she lay fast asleep on Mrs. Kirkpatrick's bed — Mrs. Kirkpatrick *née* Clare.

The housemaids came in to arrange the room. Their talking aroused Molly, who sat up on the bed, and tried to push back the hair from her hot forehead, and to remember where she was. She dropped down on her feet by the side of the bed, to the astonishment of the women, and said, — "Please, how soon are we going away?"

"Bless us and save us! who'd ha' thought of any one being in the bed? Are you one of the Hollingford ladies, my dear? They are all gone this hour or more!"

"Oh, dear, what shall I do? That lady they call Clare promised to waken me in time. Papa will so wonder where I am, and I don't know what Betty will say."

The child began to cry, and the housemaids looked at each other in some dismay and much sympathy. Just then, they heard Mrs. Kirkpatrick's step along the passages, approaching. She was singing some little

Italian air in a low musical voice, coming to her bedroom to dress for dinner. One housemaid said to the other, with a knowing look, "Best leave it to her;" and they passed on to their work in the other rooms.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick opened the door, and stood aghast at the sight of Molly.

"Why, I quite forgot you!" she said at length. "Nay, don't cry; you'll make yourself not fit to be seen. Of course I must take the consequences of your over-sleeping yourself, and if I can't manage to get you back to Hollingford to-night, you shall sleep with me, and we'll do our best to send you home to-morrow morning."

"But papa!" sobbed out Molly. "He always wants me to make tea for him; and I have no night-things."

"Well, don't go and make a piece of work about what can't be helped now. I'll lend you night-things, and your papa must do without your making tea for him to-night. And another time don't over-sleep yourself in a strange house; you may not always find yourself among such hospitable people as they are here. Why now, if you don't cry and make a figure of yourself, I'll ask if you may come in to dessert with Master Smythe and the little ladies. You shall go into the nursery, and have some tea with them; and then you must come back here and brush your hair and make yourself tidy. I think it is a very fine thing for you to be stopping in such a grand house as this; many a little girl would like nothing better."

During this speech she was arranging her toilette for dinner — taking off her black morning gown;

putting on her dressing-gown; shaking her long soft auburn hair over her shoulders, and glancing about the room in search of various articles of her dress, — a running flow of easy talk came babbling out all the time.

"I have a little girl of my own, dear! I don't know what she would not give to be staying here at Lord Cumnor's with me; but, instead of that, she has to spend her holidays at school; and yet you are looking as miserable as can be at the thought of stopping for just one night. I really have been as busy as can be with those tiresome — those good ladies, I mean, from Hollingford — and one can't think of everything at a time."

Molly — only child as she was — had stopped her tears at the mention of that little girl of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's, and now she ventured to say, —

"Are you married, ma'am; I thought she called you Clare?"

In high good-humour Mrs. Kirkpatrick made reply: — "I don't look as if I was married, do I? Every one is surprised. And yet I have been a widow for seven months now: and not a grey hair on my head, though Lady Cuxhaven, who is younger than I, has ever so many."

"Why do they call you 'Clare?'" continued Molly, finding her so affable and communicative.

"Because I lived with them when I was Miss Clare. It is a pretty name, isn't it? I married a Mr. Kirkpatrick; he was only a curate, poor fellow; but he was of a very good family, and if three of his relations had died without children I should have been a baronet's wife. But Providence did not see fit to permit it; and we must always resign ourselves to what is decreed. Two

of his cousins married, and had large families; and poor dear Kirkpatrick died, leaving me a widow."

"You have a little girl?" asked Molly.

"Yes: darling Cynthia! I wish you could see her; she is my only comfort now. If I have time I will show you her picture when we come up to bed; but I must go now. It does not do to keep Lady Cumnor waiting a moment, and she asked me to be down early, to help with some of the people in the house. Now I shall ring this bell, and when the housemaid comes, ask her to take you into the nursery, and to tell Lady Cuxhaven's nurse who you are. And then you'll have tea with the little ladies, and come in with them to dessert. There! I'm sorry you've overslept yourself, and are left here; but give me a kiss, and don't cry — you really are rather a pretty child, though you've not got Cynthia's colouring! Oh, Nanny, would you be so very kind as to take this young lady — (what's your name, my dear? Gibson?) — Miss Gibson, to Mrs. Dyson, in the nursery, and ask her to allow her to drink tea with the young ladies there; and to send her in with them to dessert. I'll explain it all to my lady."

Nanny's face brightened out of its gloom when she heard the name Gibson; and, having ascertained from Molly that she was "the doctor's" child, she showed more willingness to comply with Mrs. Kirkpatrick's request than was usual with her.

Molly was an obliging girl, and fond of children; so, as long as she was in the nursery, she got on pretty well, being obedient to the wishes of the supreme power, and even very useful to Mrs. Dyson, by playing at tricks, and thus keeping a little one quiet while its

brothers and sisters were being arrayed in gay attire, — lace and muslin, and velvet, and brilliant broad ribbons.

"Now, miss," said Mrs. Dyson, when her own especial charge were all ready, "what can I do for you? You have not got another frock here, have you?" No, indeed, she had not; nor if she had had one, could it have been of a smarter nature than her present thick white dimity. So she could only wash her face and hands, and submit to the nurse's brushing and perfuming her hair. She thought she would rather have stayed in the park all night long, and slept under the beautiful quiet cedar, than have to undergo the unknown ordeal of "going down to dessert," which was evidently regarded both by children and nurses as the event of the day. At length there was a summons from a footman, and Mrs. Dyson, in a rustling silk gown, marshalled her convoy, and set sail for the dining-room door.

There was a large party of gentlemen and ladies sitting round the decked table, in the brilliantly lighted room. Each dainty little child ran up to its mother, or aunt, or particular friend; but Molly had no one to go to.

"Who is that tall girl in the thick white frock? Not one of the children of the house, I think?"

The lady addressed put up her glass, gazed at Molly, and dropped it in an instant. "A French girl, I should imagine. I know Lady Cuxhaven was inquiring for one to bring up with her little girls, that they might get a good accent early. Poor little woman, she looks wild and strange!" And the speaker, who sate next to Lord Cumnor, made a little sign to Molly to come to her; Molly crept up to her as to the first

shelter; but when the lady began talking to her in French, she blushed violently, and said in a very low voice, —

"I don't understand French. I'm only Molly Gibson, ma'am."

"Molly Gibson!" said the lady, out loud; as if that was not much of an explanation.

Lord Cumnor caught the words and the tone.

"Oh, ho!" said he. "Are you the little girl who has been sleeping in my bed?"

He imitated the deep voice of the fabulous bear, who asks this question of the little child in the story; but Molly had never read the "Three Bears," and fancied that his anger was real; she trembled a little, and drew nearer to the kind lady who had beckoned her as to a refuge. Lord Cumnor was very fond of getting hold of what he fancied was a joke, and working his idea threadbare; so all the time the ladies were in the room he kept on his running fire at Molly, alluding to the Sleeping Beauty, the Seven Sleepers, and any other famous sleeper that came into his head. He had no idea of the misery his jokes were to the sensitive girl, who already thought herself a miserable sinner, for having slept on, when she ought to have been awake. If Molly had been in the habit of putting two and two together, she might have found an excuse for herself, by remembering that Mrs. Kirkpatrick had promised faithfully to awaken her in time; but all the girl thought of was, how little they wanted her in this grand house; how she must seem like a careless intruder who had no business there. Once or twice she wondered where her father was, and whether he was missing her; but the thought of the familiar happiness of home

brought such a choking in her throat, that she felt she must not give way to it, for fear of bursting out crying; and she had instinct enough to feel that, as she was left at the Towers, the less trouble she gave, the more she kept herself out of observation, the better.

She followed the ladies out of the dining-room, almost hoping that no one would see her. But that was impossible, and she immediately became the subject of conversation between the awful Lady Cumnor and her kind neighbour at dinner.

"Do you know, I thought this young lady was French when I first saw her? she has got the black hair and eyelashes, and grey eyes, and colourless complexion which one meets with in some parts of France, and I know Lady Cuxhaven was trying to find a well-educated girl who would be a pleasant companion to her children."

"No!" said Lady Cumnor, looking very stern, as Molly thought. "She is the daughter of our medical man at Hollingford; she came with the school visitors this morning, and she was overcome by the heat and fell asleep in Clare's room, and somehow managed to over-sleep herself, and did not waken up till all the carriages were gone. We will send her home to-morrow morning, but for to-night she must stay here, and Clare is kind enough to say she may sleep with her."

There was an implied blame running through this speech, that Molly felt like needle-points all over her. Lady Cuxhaven came up at this moment. Her tone was as deep, her manner of speaking as abrupt and authoritative, as her mother's, but Molly felt the kinder nature underneath.

"How are you now, my dear? You look better

than you did under the cedar-tree. So you're to stop here to-night? Clare, don't you think we could find some of those books of engravings that would interest Miss Gibson."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick came gliding up to the place where Molly stood; and began petting her with pretty words and actions, while Lady Cuxhaven turned over heavy volumes in search of one that might interest the girl.

"Poor darling! I saw you come into the dining-room, looking so shy; and I wanted you to come near me, but I could not make a sign to you, because Lord Cuxhaven was speaking to me at the time, telling me about his travels. Ah, here is a nice book — *Lodge's Portraits;* now I'll sit by you and tell you who they all are, and all about them. Don't trouble yourself any more, dear Lady Cuxhaven; I'll take charge of her; pray leave her to me!"

Molly grew hotter and hotter as these last words met her ear. If they would only leave her alone, and not labour at being kind to her; would "not trouble themselves" about her! These words of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's seemed to quench the gratitude she was feeling to Lady Cuxhaven for looking for something to amuse her. But, of course, it was a trouble, and she ought never to have been there.

By-and-by, Mrs. Kirkpatrick was called away to accompany Lady Agnes' song; and then Molly really had a few minutes' enjoyment. She could look round the room, unobserved, and, sure, never was any place out of a king's house so grand and magnificent. Large mirrors, velvet curtains, pictures in their gilded frames, a multitude of dazzling lights decorated the vast saloon,

and the floor was studded with groups of ladies and gentlemen, all dressed in gorgeous attire. Suddenly Molly bethought her of the children whom she had accompanied into the dining-room, and to whose ranks she had appeared to belong, — where were they? Gone to bed an hour before, at some quiet signal from their mother. Molly wondered if she might go, too — if she could ever find her way back to the haven of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's bedroom. But she was at some distance from the door; a long way from Mrs. Kirkpatrick, to whom she felt herself to belong more than to any one else. Far, too, from Lady Cuxhaven, and the terrible Lady Cumnor, and her jocose and good-natured lord. So Molly sate on, turning over pictures which she did not see; her heart growing heavier and heavier in the desolation of all this grandeur. Presently a footman entered the room, and after a moment's looking about him, he went up to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, where she sate at the piano, the centre of the musical portion of the company, ready to accompany any singer, and smiling pleasantly as she willingly acceded to all requests. She came now towards Molly, in her corner, and said to her, —

"Do you know, darling, your papa has come for you, and brought your pony for you to ride home; so I shall lose my little bedfellow, for I suppose you must go."

Go! was there a question of it in Molly's mind, as she stood up quivering, sparkling, almost crying out loud. She was brought to her senses, though, by Mrs. Kirkpatrick's next words.

"You must go and wish Lady Cumnor good-night, you know, my dear, and thank her ladyship for her

kindness to you. She is there, near that statue, talking to Mr. Courtenay."

Yes! she was there — forty feet away — a hundred miles away! All that blank space had to be crossed; and then a speech to be made!

"Must I go?" asked Molly, in the most pitiful and pleading voice possible.

"Yes; make haste about it; there is nothing so formidable in it, is there?" replied Mrs. Kirkpatrick, in a sharper voice than before, aware that they were wanting her at the piano, and anxious to get the business in hand done as soon as possible.

Molly stood still for a minute, then, looking up, she said, softly, —

"Would you mind coming with me, please?"

"No! not I!" said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, seeing that her compliance was likely to be the most speedy way of getting through the affair; so she took Molly's hand, and, on the way, in passing the group at the piano, she said, smiling, in her pretty genteel manner, —

"Our little friend here is shy and modest, and wants me to accompany her to Lady Cumnor to wish good-night; her father has come for her, and she is going away."

Molly did not know how it was afterwards, but she pulled her hand out of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's on hearing these words, and going a step or two in advance came up to Lady Cumnor, grand in purple velvet, and dropping a curtsey almost after the fashion of the school-children, she said, —

"My lady, papa is come, and I am going away; and, my lady, I wish you good-night, and thank you for your kindness. Your ladyship's kindness, I mean,"

she said, correcting herself as she remembered Miss Browning's particular instructions as to the etiquette to be observed to earls and countesses, and their honourable progeny, as they were given that morning on the road to the Towers.

She got out of the saloon somehow; she believed afterwards, on thinking about it, that she had never bidden good-by to Lady Cuxhaven, or Mrs. Kirkpatrick, or "all the rest of them," as she irreverently styled them in her thoughts.

Mr. Gibson was in the housekeeper's room, when Molly ran in, rather to the stately Mrs. Brown's discomfiture. She threw her arms round her father's neck. "Oh, papa, papa, papa! I am so glad you have come;" and then she burst out crying, stroking his face almost hysterically as if to make sure he was there.

"Why, what a noodle you are, Molly! Did you think I was going to give up my little girl to live at the Towers all the rest of her life? You make as much work about my coming for you, as if you thought I had. Make haste, now, and get on your bonnet. Mrs. Brown, may I ask you for a shawl, or a plaid, or a wrap of some kind to pin about her for a petticoat?"

He did not mention that he had come home from a long round not half an hour before, a round from which he had returned dinnerless and hungry; but, on finding that Molly had not come back from the Towers, he had ridden his tired horse round by Miss Brownings', and found them in self-reproachful, helpless dismay. He would not wait to listen to their tearful apologies; he galloped home, had a fresh horse and Molly's pony saddled, and though Betty called after him with a riding-skirt for the child, when he was not ten yards

from his own stable-door, he refused to turn back for it, but went off, as Dick the stableman said, "muttering to himself awful."

Mrs. Brown had her bottle of wine out, and her plate of cake, before Molly came back from her long expedition to Mrs. Kirkpatrick's room, "pretty nigh on to a quarter of a mile off," as the housekeeper informed the impatient father, as he waited for his child to come down arrayed in her morning's finery with the gloss of newness worn off. Mr. Gibson was a favourite in all the Towers' house-hold, as family doctors generally are; bringing hopes of relief at times of anxiety and distress; and Mrs. Brown, who was subject to gout, especially delighted in petting him whenever he would allow her. She even went out into the stable-yard to pin Molly up in the shawl, as she sate upon the rough-coated pony, and hazarded the somewhat safe conjecture, —

"I daresay she'll be happier at home, Mr. Gibson," as they rode away.

Once out into the park Molly struck her pony, and urged him on as hard as he would go. Mr. Gibson called out at last:

"Molly! we're coming to the rabbit-holes; it's not safe to go at such a pace. Stop." And as she drew rein he rode up alongside of her.

"We're getting into the shadow of the trees, and it's not safe riding fast here."

"Oh! papa, I never was so glad in all my life. I felt like a lighted candle when they're putting the extinguisher on it."

"Did you? How d'ye know what the candle feels?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I did." And again, after a pause, she said, — "Oh, I am so glad to be here! It is so pleasant riding here in the open free, fresh air, crushing out such a good smell from the dewy grass. Papa! are you there? I can't see you."

He rode close up alongside of her: he was not sure but what she might be afraid of riding in the dark shadows, so he laid his hand upon hers.

"Oh! I am so glad to feel you," squeezing his hand hard. "Papa, I should like to get a chain like Ponto's, just as long as your longest round, and then I could fasten us two to each end of it, and when I wanted you I could pull, and if you did not want to come, you could pull back again; but I should know you knew I wanted you, and we could never lose each other."

"I'm rather lost in that plan of yours; the details, as you state them, are a little puzzling; but if I make them out rightly, I am to go about the country, like the donkeys on the common, with a clog fastened to my hind leg."

"I don't mind your calling me a clog, if only we were fastened together."

"But I do mind you calling me a donkey," he replied.

"I never did. At least I did not mean to. But it is such a comfort to know that I may be as rude as I like."

"Is that what you've learnt from the grand company you've been keeping to-day? I expected to find you so polite and ceremonious, that I read a few chapters of *Sir Charles Grandison*, in order to bring myself up to concert pitch."

"Oh, I do hope I shall never be a lord or a lady."

"Well, to comfort you, I'll tell you this: I'm sure you'll never be a lord; and I think the chances are a thousand to one against your ever being the other, in the sense in which you mean."

"I should lose myself every time I had to fetch my bonnet, or else get tired of long passages and great staircases long before I could go out walking."

"But you'd have your lady's-maid, you know."

"Do you know, papa, I think lady's-maids are worse than ladies. I should not mind being a housekeeper so much."

"No! the jam-cupboards and dessert would lie very conveniently to one's hand," replied her father, meditatively. "But Mrs. Brown tells me that the thought of the dinners often keeps her from sleeping; there's that anxiety to be taken into consideration. Still, in every condition of life, there are heavy cares and responsibilities."

"Well! I suppose so," said Molly, gravely. "I know Betty says I wear her life out with the green stains I get in my frocks from sitting in the cherry-tree."

"And Miss Browning said she had fretted herself into a headache with thinking how they had left you behind. I'm afraid you'll be as bad as a bill of fare to them to-night. How did it all happen, goosey?"

"Oh, I went by myself to see the gardens; they are so beautiful! and I lost myself, and sat down to rest under a great tree; and Lady Cuxhaven and that Mrs. Kirkpatrick came; and Mrs. Kirkpatrick brought me some lunch, and then put me to sleep on her bed,

— and I thought she would waken me in time, and she did not; and so they'd all gone away; and when they planned for me to stop till to-morrow, I didn't like saying how very, very much I wanted to go home, — but I kept thinking how you would wonder where I was."

"Then it was rather a dismal day of pleasure, goosey, eh?"

"Not in the morning. I shall never forget the morning in that garden. But I was never so unhappy in all my life, as I have been all this long afternoon."

Mr. Gibson thought it his duty to ride round by the Towers, and pay a visit of apology and thanks to the family, before they left for London. He found them all on the wing, and no one was sufficiently at liberty to listen to his grateful civilities but Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who, although she was to accompany Lady Cuxhaven, and pay a visit to her former pupil, made leisure enough to receive Mr. Gibson, on behalf of the family; and assured him of her faithful remembrance of his great professional attention to her in former days in the most winning manner.

CHAPTER III.

Molly Gibson's Childhood.

SIXTEEN years before this time, all Hollingford had been disturbed to its foundations by the intelligence that Mr. Hall, the skilful doctor, who had attended them all their days, was going to take a partner. It was no use reasoning to them on the subject; so Mr. Browning the vicar, Mr. Sheepshanks (Lord Cumnor's agent), and Mr. Hall himself, the masculine reasoners of the little society, left off the attempt, feeling that the *Che sarà sarà* would prove more silencing to the murmurs than many arguments. Mr. Hall had told his faithful patients that, even with the strongest spectacles, his sight was not to be depended upon; and they might have found out for themselves that his hearing was very defective, although, on this point, he obstinately adhered to his own opinion, and was frequently heard to regret the carelessness of people's communication nowadays, "like writing on blotting-paper, all the words running into each other," he would say. And more than once Mr. Hall had had attacks of a suspicious nature, — "rheumatism" he used to call them; but he prescribed for himself as if they had been gout, which had prevented his immediate attention to imperative summonses. But, blind and deaf, and rheumatic as he might be, he was still Mr. Hall the doctor who could heal all their ailments — unless they died meanwhile — and he had no right to speak of growing old, and taking a partner.

He went very steadily to work all the same; advertising in medical journals, reading testimonials, sifting character and qualifications; and just when the elderly maiden ladies of Hollingford thought that they had convinced their contemporary that he was as young as ever, he startled them by bringing his new partner, Mr. Gibson, to call upon them, and began "slyly," as these ladies said, to introduce him into practice. And "who was this Mr. Gibson?" they asked, and echo might answer the question, if she liked, for no one else did. No one ever in all his life knew anything more of his antecedents than the Hollingford people might have found out the first day they saw him: that he was tall, grave, rather handsome than otherwise; thin enough to be called "a very genteel figure," in those days, before muscular Christianity had come into vogue; speaking with a slight Scotch accent; and, as one good lady observed, "so very trite in his conversation," by which she meant sarcastic. As to his birth, parentage, and education, — the favourite conjecture of Hollingford society was, that he was the illegitimate son of a Scotch duke, by a Frenchwoman; and the grounds for this conjecture were these: — He spoke with a Scotch accent; therefore, he must be Scotch. He had a very genteel appearance, an elegant figure, and was apt — so his ill-wishers said — to give himself airs; therefore, his father must have been some person of quality; and, that granted, nothing was easier than to run this supposition up all the notes of the scale of the peerage, — baronet, baron, viscount, earl, marquis, duke. Higher they dared not go, though one old lady, acquainted with English history, hazarded the remark, that "she believed that one or two of the

Stuarts — hem — had not always been, — ahem — quite correct in their — conduct; and she fancied such — ahem — things ran in families." But, in popular opinion, Mr. Gibson's father always remained a duke; nothing more.

Then his mother must have been a Frenchwoman, because his hair was so black; and he was so sallow; and because he had been in Paris. All this might be true, or might not; nobody ever knew, or found out anything more about him than what Mr. Hall told them, namely, that his professional qualifications were as high as his moral character, and that both were far above the average, as Mr. Hall had taken pains to ascertain before introducing him to his patients. The popularity of this world is as transient as its glory, as Mr. Hall found out before the first year of his partnership was over. He had plenty of leisure left to him now to nurse his gout and cherish his eyesight. The younger doctor had carried the day; nearly every one sent for Mr. Gibson. Even at the great houses — even at the Towers, that greatest of all, where Mr. Hall had introduced his new partner with fear and trembling, with untold anxiety as to his behaviour, and the impression he might make on my lord the Earl, and my lady the Countess, Mr. Gibson was received at the end of a twelvemonth with as much welcome respect for his professional skill as Mr. Hall himself had ever been. Nay — and this was a little too much for even the kind old doctor's good temper — Mr. Gibson had even been invited once to dinner at the Towers, to dine with the great Sir Astley, the head of the profession! To be sure, Mr. Hall had been asked as well; but he was laid up just then with his

gout (since he had had a partner the rheumatism had been allowed to develope itself), and he had not been able to go. Poor. Mr. Hall never quite got over this mortification; after it he allowed himself to become dim of sight and hard of hearing, and kept pretty closely to the house during the two winters that remained of his life. He sent for an orphan grand-niece to keep him company in his old age; he, the woman-contemning old bachelor, became thankful for the cheerful presence of the pretty, bonny Mary Pearson, who was good and sensible, and nothing more. She formed a close friendship with the daughters of the vicar, Mr. Browning, and Mr. Gibson found time to become very intimate with all three. Hollingford speculated much on which young lady would become Mrs. Gibson, and was rather sorry when the talk about possibilities, and the gossip about probabilities, with regard to the handsome young surgeon's marriage, ended in the most natural manner in the world, by his marrying his predecessor's niece. The two Miss Brownings showed no signs of going into a consumption on the occasion, although their looks and manners were carefully watched. On the contrary, they were rather boisterously merry at the wedding, and poor Mrs. Gibson it was that died of consumption, four or five years after her marriage — three years after the death of her great-uncle, and when her only child, Molly, was just three years old.

Mr. Gibson did not speak much about the grief at the loss of his wife, which it was supposed that he felt. Indeed, he avoided all demonstrations of sympathy, and got up hastily and left the room when Miss Phœbe Browning first saw him after his loss, and burst into

an uncontrollable flood of tears, which threatened to end in hysterics. Miss Browning afterwards said she never could forgive him for his hard-heartedness on that occasion; but a fortnight afterwards she came to very high words with old Mrs. Goodenough, for gasping out her doubts whether Mr. Gibson was a man of deep feeling; judging by the narrowness of his crape hat-band, which ought to have covered his hat, whereas there was at least three inches of beaver to be seen. And, in spite of it all, Miss Browning and Miss Phœbe considered themselves as Mr. Gibson's most intimate friends, in right of their regard for his dead wife, and would fain have taken a quasi-motherly interest in his little girl, had she not been guarded by a watchful dragon in the shape of Betty, her nurse, who was jealous of any interference between her and her charge; and especially resentful and disagreeable towards all those ladies who, by suitable age, rank, or propinquity, she thought capable of "casting sheep's eyes at master."

Several years before the opening of this story, Mr. Gibson's position seemed settled for life, both socially and professionally. He was a widower, and likely to remain so; his domestic affections were centred on little Molly, but even to her, in their most private moments, he did not give way to much expression of his feelings; his most caressing appellation for her was "Goosey," and he took a pleasure in bewildering her infant mind with his badinage. He had rather a contempt for demonstrative people, arising from his medical insight into the consequences to health of uncontrolled feeling. He deceived himself into believing that still his reason was lord of all, because he had never fallen into the

habit of expression on any other than purely intellectual subjects. Molly, however, had her own intuitions to guide her. Though her papa laughed at her, quizzed her, joked at her, in a way which the Miss Brownings called "really cruel" to each other when they were quite alone, Molly took her little griefs and pleasures, and poured them into her papa's ears, sooner even than into Betty's, that kind-hearted termagant. The child grew to understand her father well, and the two had the most delightful intercourse together — half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship. Mr. Gibson kept three servants; Betty, a cook, and a girl who was supposed to be housemaid, but who was under both the elder two, and had a pretty life of it in consequence. Three servants would not have been required if it had not been Mr. Gibson's habit, as it had been Mr. Hall's before him, to take two "pupils," as they were called in the genteel language of Hollingford, "apprentices," as they were in fact — being bound by indentures, and paying a handsome premium to learn their business. They lived in the house, and occupied an uncomfortable, ambiguous, or, as Miss Browning called it with some truth, "amphibious" position. They had their meals with Mr. Gibson and Molly, and were felt to be terribly in the way; Mr. Gibson not being a man who could make conversation, and hating the duty of talking under restraint. Yet something within him made him wince, as if his duties were not rightly performed, when, as the cloth was drawn, the two awkward lads rose up with joyful alacrity, gave him a nod, which was to be interpreted as a bow, knocked against each other in their endeavours to get out of the dining-room

quickly; and then might be heard dashing along a passage which led to the surgery, choking with half-suppressed laughter. Yet the annoyance he felt at this dull sense of imperfectly fulfilled duties only made his sarcasms on their inefficiency, or stupidity, or ill manners, more bitter than before.

Beyond direct professional instruction, he did not know what to do with the succession of pairs of young men, whose mission seemed to be, to be plagued by their master consciously, and to plague him unconsciously. Once or twice Mr. Gibson had declined taking a fresh pupil, in the hopes of shaking himself free from the incubus, but his reputation as a clever surgeon had spread so rapidly that his fees which he had thought prohibitory, were willingly paid, in order that the young man might make a start in life, with the prestige of having been a pupil of Gibson of Hollingford. But as Molly grew to be a little girl instead of a child, when she was about eight years old, her father perceived the awkwardness of her having her breakfasts and dinners so often alone with the pupils, without his uncertain presence. To do away with this evil, more than for the actual instruction she could give, he engaged a respectable woman, the daughter of a shopkeeper in the town, who had left a destitute family, to come every morning before breakfast, and to stay with Molly till he came home at night; or, if he was detained, until the child's bed-time.

"Now, Miss Eyre," said he, summing up his instructions the day before she entered upon her office, "remember this: you are to make good tea for the young men, and see that they have their meals comfortably, and — you are five-and-thirty, I think you

said?—try and make them talk,—rationally, I am afraid is beyond your or anybody's power; but make them talk without stammering or giggling. Don't teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read."

Miss Eyre listened in silence, perplexed but determined to be obedient to the directions of the doctor, whose kindness she and her family had good cause to know. She made strong tea; she helped the young men liberally in Mr. Gibson's absence, as well as in his presence, and she found the way to unloosen their tongues, whenever their master was away, by talking to them on trivial subjects in her pleasant homely way. She taught Molly to read and write, but tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education. It was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons. He was always afraid of her becoming too much educated, though he need not have been alarmed; the masters who visited such small country towns as Hollingford forty years ago, were no such great proficients in their arts. Once a week she joined a dancing class in the assembly-room at the principal inn in the town: the "Cumnor Arms;" and, being daunted by her father in every intellectual attempt, she read every book that came in her way,

almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden. For his station in life, Mr. Gibson had an unusually good library; the medical portion of it was inaccessible to Molly, being kept in the surgery, but every other book she had either read, or tried to read. Her summer place of study was that seat in the cherry-tree, where she got the green stains on her frock, that have already been mentioned as likely to wear Betty's life out. In spite of this "hidden worm i' th' bud," Betty was to all appearance strong, alert, and flourishing. She was the one crook in Miss Eyre's lot, who was otherwise so happy in having met with a suitable well-paid employment just when she needed it most. But Betty, though agreeing in theory with her master when he told her of the necessity of having a governess for his little daughter, was vehemently opposed to any division of her authority and influence over the child who had been her charge, her plague, and her delight ever since Mrs. Gibson's death. She took up her position as censor of all Miss Eyre's sayings and doings from the very first, and did not for one moment condescend to conceal her disapprobation in her heart. She could not help respecting the patience and painstaking of the good lady, — for a "lady" Miss Eyre was in the best sense of the word, though in Hollingford she only took rank as a shopkeeper's daughter. Yet Betty buzzed about her with the teasing pertinacity of a gnat, always ready to find fault, if not to bite. Miss Eyre's only defence came from the quarter whence it might least have been expected — from her pupil; on whose fancied behalf, as an oppressed little personage, Betty always based her attacks. But very early in the day Molly perceived their injustice, and

soon afterwards she began to respect Miss Eyre for her silent endurance of what evidently gave her far more pain than Betty imagined. Mr. Gibson had been a friend in need to her family, so Miss Eyre restrained her complaints, sooner than annoy him. And she had her reward. Betty would offer Molly all sorts of small temptations to neglect Miss Eyre's wishes; Molly steadily resisted, and plodded away at her task of sewing or her difficult sum. Betty made cumbrous jokes at Miss Eyre's expense. Molly looked up with the utmost gravity, as if requesting the explanation of an unintelligible speech; and there is nothing so quenching to a wag as to be asked to translate his jest into plain matter-of-fact English, and to show wherein the point lies. Occasionally Betty lost her temper entirely, and spoke impertinently to Miss Eyre; but when this had been done in Molly's defence, the girl flew out in such a violent passion of words in defence of her silent trembling governess, that even Betty herself was daunted, though she chose to take the child's anger as a good joke, and tried to persuade Miss Eyre herself to join in her amusement.

"Bless the child! one would think I was a hungry pussy-cat, and she a hen-sparrow, with her wings all fluttering, and her little eyes aflame, and her beak ready to peck me just because I happened to look near her nest. Nay, child! if thou lik'st to be stifled in a nasty close room, learning things as is of no earthly good when they is learnt, instead o' riding on Job Donkin's hay-cart, it's thy look-out, not mine. She's a little vixen, isn't she?" smiling at Miss Eyre, as she finished her speech. But the poor governess saw no humour in the affair; the comparison of Molly to a

hen-sparrow was lost upon her. She was sensitive and conscientious, and knew, from home experience, the evils of an ungovernable temper. So she began to reprove Molly for giving way to her passion, and the child thought it hard to be blamed for what she considered her just anger against Betty. But, after all, these were the small grievances of a very happy childhood.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Gibson's Neighbours.

MOLLY grew up among these quiet people in calm monotony of life, without any greater event than that which has been recorded, — the being left behind at the Towers — until she was nearly seventeen. She had become a visitor at the school, but she had never gone again to the annual festival at the great house; it was easy to find some excuse for keeping away, and the recollection of that day was not a pleasant one on the whole, though she often thought how much she should like to see the gardens again.

Lady Agnes was married; there was only Lady Harriet remaining at home; Lord Hollingford, the eldest son, had lost his wife, and was a good deal more at the Towers since he had become a widower. He was a tall ungainly man, considered to be as proud as his mother, the countess; but, in fact, he was only shy, and slow at making commonplace speeches. He did not know what to say to people whose daily habits and interests were not the same as his; he would have been very thankful for a handbook of small-talk, and would have learnt off his sentences with good-humoured diligence. He often envied the fluency of his garrulous father, who delighted in talking to everybody, and was perfectly unconscious of the incoherence of his conversation. But, owing to his constitutional reserve and shyness, Lord Hollingford was not a popular man although his kindness of heart was very great, his sim-

plicity of character extreme, and his scientific acquirements considerable enough to entitle him to much reputation in the European republic of learned men. In this respect Hollingford was proud of him. The inhabitants knew that the great, grave, clumsy heir to its fealty was highly esteemed for his wisdom; and that he had made one or two discoveries, though in what direction they were no quite sure. But it was safe to point him out to strangers visiting the little town, as "That's Lord Hollingford — the famous Lord Hollingford, you know; you must have heard of him, he is so scientific." If the strangers knew his name, they also knew his claims to fame; if they did not, ten to one but they would appear as if they did, and so conceal not only their own ignorance, but that of their companions, as to the exact nature of the sources of his reputation.

He was left a widower with two or three boys. They were at a public school; so that their companionship could make the house in which he had passed his married life but little of a home to him, and he consequently spent much of his time at the Towers; where his mother was proud of him, and his father very fond, but ever so little afraid of him. His friends were always welcomed by Lord and Lady Cumnor; the former, indeed, was in the habit of welcoming everybody everywhere; but it was a proof of Lady Cumnor's real affection for her distinguished son, that she allowed him to ask what she called "all sorts of people" to the Towers. "All sorts of people" meant really those who were distinguished for science and learning, without regard to rank: and it must be confessed, without much regard to polished manners likewise.

Mr. Hall, Mr. Gibson's predecessor, had always been received with friendly condescension by my lady, who had found him established as the family medical man, when first she came to the Towers on her marriage; but she never thought of interfering with his custom of taking his meals, if he needed refreshment, in the housekeeper's room, not *with* the housekeeper, *bien entendu.* The comfortable, clever, stout, and red-faced doctor would very much have preferred this, even if he had had the choice given him (which he never had) of taking his "snack," as he called it, with my lord and my lady, in the grand dining-room. Of course, if some great surgical gun (like Sir Astley) was brought down from London to bear on the family's health, it was due to him, as well as to the local medical attendant, to ask Mr. Hall to dinner, in a formal ceremonious manner, on which occasion Mr. Hall buried his chin in voluminous folds of white muslin, put on his knee-breeches, with bunches of ribbon at the sides, his silk stockings and buckled shoes, and otherwise made himself excessively uncomfortable in his attire, and went forth in state in a post-chaise from the "Cumnor Arms," consoling himself in the private corner of his heart for the discomfort he was enduring with the idea of how well it would sound the next day in the ears of the squires whom he was in the habit of attending. "Yesterday at dinner the earl said," or "the countess remarked," or "I was surprised to hear when I was dining at the Towers yesterday." But somehow things had changed since Mr. Gibson had become "the doctor" par excellence at Hollingford. Miss Brownings thought that it was because he had such an elegant figure, and "such a

distinguished manner;" Mrs. Goodenough, "because of his aristocratic connections" — "the son of a Scotch duke, my dear, never mind on which side of the blanket" — but the fact was certain; although he might frequently ask Mrs. Brown to give him something to eat in the housekeeper's room — he had no time for all the fuss and ceremony of luncheon with my lady — he was always welcome to the grandest circle of visitors in the house. He might lunch with a duke any day that he chose; given that a duke was forthcoming at the Towers. His accent was Scotch, not provincial. He had not an ounce of superfluous flesh on his bones; and leanness goes a great way to gentility. His complexion was sallow, and his hair black; in those days, the decade after the conclusion of the great continental war, to be sallow and black-a-vised was of itself a distinction; he was not jovial (as my lord remarked with a sigh, but it was my lady who endorsed the invitations), sparing of his words, intelligent, and slightly sarcastic. Therefore he was perfectly presentable.

His Scotch blood (for that he was of Scottish descent there could be no manner of doubt) gave him just the kind of thistly dignity which made every one feel that they must treat him with respect; so on that head he was assured. The grandeur of being an invited guest to dinner at the Towers from time to time, gave him but little pleasure for many years, but it was a form to be gone through in the way of his profession, without any idea of social gratification.

But when Lord Hollingford returned to make the Towers his home, affairs were altered. Mr. Gibson

really heard and learnt things that interested him seriously, and that gave fresh flavour to his reading. From time to time he met the leaders of the scientific world; odd-looking, simple-hearted men, very much in earnest about their own particular subjects, and not having much to say on any other. Mr. Gibson found himself capable of appreciating such persons, and also perceived that they valued his appreciation, as it was honestly and intelligently given. Indeed, by-and-by, he began to send contributions of his own to the more scientific of the medical journals, and thus partly in receiving, partly in giving out information and accurate thought, a new zest was added to his life. There was not much intercourse between Lord Hollingford and himself; the one was too silent and shy, the other two busy, to seek each other's society with the perseverance required to do away with the social distinction of rank that prevented their frequent meetings. But each was thoroughly pleased to come into contact with the other. Each could rely on the other's respect and sympathy with a security unknown to many who call themselves friends; and this was a source of happiness to both; to Mr. Gibson the most so, of course; for his range of intelligent and cultivated society was the smaller. Indeed, there was no one equal to himself among the men with whom he associated, and this he had felt as a depressing influence, although he had never recognized the cause of his depression. There was Mr. Ashton, the vicar, who had succeeded Mr. Browning, a thoroughly good and kind-hearted man, but one without an original thought in him; whose habitual courtesy and indolent mind led him to agree to every opinion, not palpably heterodox, and to utter platitudes

in the most gentlemanly manner. Mr. Gibson had once or twice amused himself, by leading the vicar on in his agreeable admissions of arguments "as perfectly convincing," and of statements as "curious but undoubted," till he had planted the poor clergyman in a bog of heretical bewilderment. But then Mr. Ashton's pain and suffering at suddenly finding out into what a theological predicament he had been brought, his real self-reproach at his previous admissions, were so great that Mr. Gibson lost all sense of fun, and hastened back to the Thirty-nine Articles with all the good-will in life, as the only means of soothing the vicar's conscience. On any other subject, except that of orthodoxy, Mr. Gibson could lead him any lengths; but then his ignorance on most of them prevented bland acquiescence from arriving at any results which could startle him. He had some private fortune, and was not married, and lived the life of an indolent and refined bachelor; but though he himself was no very active visitor among his poorer parishioners, he was always willing to relieve their wants in the most liberal, and, considering his habits, occasionally in the most self-denying manner, whenever Mr. Gibson, or any one else, made them clearly known to him. "Use my purse as freely as if it was your own, Gibson," he was wont to say. "I'm such a bad one at going about and making talk to poor folk — I daresay I don't do enough in that way — but I am most willing to give you anything for any one you may consider in want."

"Thank you; I come upon you pretty often, I believe, and make very little scruple about it; but if you'll allow me to suggest, it is, that you should not try to

make talk when you go into the cottages; but just talk."

"I don't see the difference," said the vicar, a little querulously; "but I daresay there is a difference, and I have no doubt what you say is quite true. I should not make talk, but talk; and as both are equally difficult to me, you must let me purchase the privilege of silence by this ten-pound note."

"Thank you. It is not so satisfactory to me; and, I should think, not to yourself. But probably the Joneses and Greens will prefer it."

Mr. Ashton would look with plaintive inquiry into Mr. Gibson's face after some such speech, as if asking if a sarcasm was intended. On the whole they went on in the most amiable way; only beyond the gregarious feeling common to most men, they had very little actual pleasure in each other's society. Perhaps the man of all others to whom Mr. Gibson took the most kindly—at least, until Lord Hollingford came into the neighbourhood — was a certain Squire Hamley. He and his ancestors had been called squire as long back as local tradition extended. But there was many a greater land-owner in the county, for Squire Hamley's estate was not more than eight hundred acres or so. But his family had been in possession of it long before the Earls of Cumnor had been heard of; before the Hely-Harrisons had bought Coldstone Park; no one in Hollingford knew the time when the Hamleys had not lived at Hamley. "Ever since the Heptarchy," said the vicar. "Nay," said Miss Browning, "I have heard that there were Hamleys of Hamley before the Romans." The vicar was preparing a polite assent, when Mrs. Goodenough came in with a still more startling asser-

tion. "I have always heerd," said she, with all the slow authority of an oldest inhabitant, "that there was Hamley's of Hamley afore the time of the pagans." Mr. Ashton could only bow, and say, "Possibly, very possibly, madam." But he said it in so courteous a manner that Mrs. Goodenough looked round in a gratified way, as much as to say, "The Church confirms my words; who now will dare dispute them?" At any rate, the Hamleys were a very old family, if not aborigines. They had not increased their estate for centuries; they had held their own, if even with an effort, and had not sold a rood of it for the last hundred years or so. But they were not an adventurous race. They never traded, or speculated, or tried agricultural improvements of any kind. They had no capital in any bank; nor what perhaps would have been more in character, hoards of gold in any stocking. Their mode of life was simple, and more like that of yeomen than squires. Indeed Squire Hamley, by continuing the primitive manners and customs of his forefathers the squires of the eighteenth century, did live more as a yeoman, when such a class existed, than as a squire of this generation. There was a dignity in this quiet conservatism that gained him an immense amount of respect both from high and low; and he might have visited at every house in the county had he so chosen. But he was very indifferent to the charms of society; and perhaps this was owing to the fact that the squire, Roger Hamley, who at present lived and reigned at Hamley, had not received so good an education as he ought to have done. His father, Squire Stephen, had been plucked at Oxford, and, with stubborn pride, he had refused to go up again. Nay more! he had sworn

a great oath, as men did in those days, that none of his children to come should ever know either university by becoming a member of it. He had only one child, the present squire, and he was brought up according to his father's word; he was sent to a petty provincial school, where he saw much that he hated, and then turned loose upon the estate as its heir. Such a bringing up did not do him all the harm that might have been anticipated. He was imperfectly educated, and ignorant on many points; but he was aware of his deficiency, and regretted it in theory. He was awkward and ungainly in society, and so kept out of it as much as possible; and he was obstinate, violent-tempered, and dictatorial in his own immediate circle. On the other side, he was generous, and true as steel; the very soul of honour, in fact. He had so much natural shrewdness, that his conversation was always worth listening to, although he was apt to start by assuming entirely false premises, which he considered as incontrovertible as if they had been mathematically proved; but, given the correctness of his premises, nobody could bring more natural wit and sense to bear upon the arguments based upon them. He had married a delicate fine London lady; it was one of those perplexing marriages of which one cannot understand the reasons. Yet they were very happy, though possibly Mrs. Hamley would not have sunk into the condition of a chronic invalid, if her husband had cared a little more for her various tastes, or allowed her the companionship of those who did. After his marriage he was wont to say he had got all that was worth having out of the crowd of houses they called London. It was a compliment to his wife which he repeated until the year of her death;

it charmed her at first, it pleased her up to the last time of her hearing it; but, for all that, she used sometimes to wish that he would recognize the fact that there might still be something worth hearing and seeing in the great city. But he never went there again, and though he did not prohibit her going, yet he showed so little sympathy with her when she came back full of what she had done on her visit that she ceased caring to go. Not but what he was kind and willing in giving his consent, and in furnishing her amply with money. "There, there, my little woman, take that! Dress yourself up as fine as any on 'em, and buy what you like, for the credit of Hamley of Hamley; and go to the park and the play, and show off with the best on 'em. I shall be glad to see thee back again, I know; but have thy fling while thou art about it." Then when she came back it was, "Well, well, it has pleased thee, I suppose, so that's all right. But the very talking about it tires me, I know, and I can't think how you have stood it all. Come out and see how pretty the flowers are looking in the south garden. I've made them sow all the seeds you like; and I went over to Hollingford nursery to buy the cuttings of the plants you admired last year. A breath of fresh air will clear my brain after listening to all this talk about the whirl of London, which is like to have turned me giddy."

Mrs. Hamley was a great reader, and had considerable literary taste. She was gentle and sentimental; tender and good. She gave up her visits to London; she gave up her sociable pleasure in the company of her fellows in education and position. Her husband, owing to the deficiencies of his early years, disliked

associating with those to whom he ought to have been an equal; he was too proud to mingle with his inferiors. He loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well. Perhaps if she had had a daughter it would have been better for her: but her two children were boys, and their father, anxious to give them the advantages of which he himself had suffered the deprivation, sent the lads very early to a preparatory school. They were to go on to Rugby and Cambridge; the idea of Oxford was hereditarily distasteful in the Hamley family. Osborne, the eldest — so called after his mother's maiden name — was full of taste, and had some talent. His appearance had all the grace and refinement of his mother's. He was sweet-tempered and affectionate, almost as demonstrative as a girl. He did well at school, carrying away many prizes; and was, in a word, the pride and delight of both father and mother; the confidential friend of the latter, in default of any other. Roger was two years younger than Osborne; clumsy and heavily built, like his father; his face was square, and the expression grave, and rather immobile. He was good, but dull, his schoolmasters said. He won no prizes, but brought home a favourable report of his conduct. When he caressed his mother, she used laughingly to allude to the fable of the lap-dog and the donkey; so thereafter he left off all personal demonstration of affection. It was a great question as to whether he was to follow his brother to college after he left Rugby. Mrs. Hamley thought it would be rather a throwing away of money, as he was so little likely to distinguish himself in in-

tellectual pursuits; anything practical — such as a civil engineer — would be more the kind of life for him. She thought that it would be too mortifying for him to go to the same college and university as his brother, who was sure to distinguish himself — and, to be repeatedly plucked, to come away wooden-spoon at last. But his father persevered doggedly, as was his wont, in his intention of giving both his sons the same education; they should both have the advantages of which he had been deprived. If Roger did not do well at Cambridge it would be his own fault. If his father did not send him thither, some day or other he might be regretting the omission, as Squire Stephen had done himself for many a year. So Roger followed his brother Osborne to Trinity, and Mrs. Hamley was again left alone, after the year of indecision as to Roger's destination, which had been brought on by her urgency. She had not been able for many years to walk beyond her garden; the greater part of her life was spent on a sofa, wheeled to the window in summer, to the fireside in winter. The room which she inhabited was large and pleasant; four tall windows looked out upon a lawn dotted over with flower-beds, and melting away into a small wood, in the centre of which there was a pond, filled with water-lilies. About this unseen pond in the deep shade Mrs. Hamley had written many a pretty four-versed poem since she lay on her sofa, alternately reading and composing verse. She had a small table by her side on which there were the newest works of poetry and fiction; a pencil and blotting-book, with loose sheets of blank paper; a vase of flowers always of her husband's gathering; winter and summer, she had a sweet fresh nosegay every day. Her maid brought

her a draught of medicine every three hours, with a glass of clear water and a biscuit; her husband came to her as often as his love for the open air and his labours out-of-doors permitted; but the event of her day, when her boys were absent, was Mr. Gibson's frequent professional visits.

He knew there was real secret harm going on all this time that people spoke of her as a merely fanciful invalid; and that one or two accused him of humouring her fancies. But he only smiled at such accusations. He felt that his visits were a real pleasure and lightening of her growing and indescribable discomfort; he knew that Squire Hamley would have been only too glad if he had come every day; and he was conscious that by careful watching of her symptoms he might mitigate her bodily pain. Besides all these reasons, he took great pleasure in the squire's society. Mr. Gibson enjoyed the other's unreasonableness; his quaintness; his strong conservatism in religion, politics, and morals. Mrs. Hamley tried sometimes to apologize for, or to soften away, opinions which she fancied were offensive to the doctor, or contradictions which she thought too abrupt; but at such times her husband would lay his great hand almost caressingly on Mr. Gibson's shoulder, and soothe his wife's anxiety, by saying, "Let us alone, little woman. We understand each other, don't we, doctor? Why, bless your life, he gives me better than he gets many a time; only, you see, he sugars it over, and says a sharp thing, and pretends it's all civility and humility; but I can tell when he's giving me a pill."

One of Mrs. Hamley's often-expressed wishes had been, that Molly might come and pay her a visit. Mr.

Gibson always refused this request of hers, though he could hardly have given his reasons for these refusals. He did not want to lose the companionship of his child, in fact; but he put it to himself in quite a different way. He thought her lessons and her regular course of employment would be interrupted. The life in Mrs. Hamley's heated and scented room would not be good for the girl; Osborne and Roger Hamley would be at home, and he did not wish Molly to be thrown too exclusively upon them for young society; or they would not be at home, and it would be rather dull and depressing for his girl to be all the day long with a nervous invalid.

But at length the day came when Mr. Gibson rode over, and volunteered a visit from Molly; an offer which Mrs. Hamley received with the "open arms of her heart," as she expressed it; and of which the duration was unspecified. And the cause for this change in Mr. Gibson's wishes was as follows: — It has been mentioned that he took pupils, rather against his inclination, it is true; but there they were, a Mr. Wynne and Mr. Coxe, "the young gentlemen," as they were called in the household; "Mr. Gibson's young gentlemen," as they were termed in the town. Mr. Wynne was the elder, the more experienced one, who could occasionally take his master's place, and who gained experience by visiting the poor, and the "chronic cases." Mr. Gibson used to talk over his practice with Mr. Wynne, and try and elicit his opinions in the vain hope that, some day or another, Mr. Wynne might start an original thought. The young man was cautious and slow; he would never do any harm by his rashness, but at the same time he would always be a little behind his day.

Still Mr. Gibson remembered that he had had far worse "young gentlemen" to deal with; and was content with, if not thankful for, such an elder pupil as Mr. Wynne. Mr. Coxe was a boy of nineteen or so, with brilliant red hair, and a tolerably red face, of both of which he was very conscious and much ashamed. He was the son of an Indian officer, an old acquaintance of Mr. Gibson's. Major Coxe was at some unpronounceable station in the Punjaub, at the present time; but the year before he had been in England, and had repeatedly expressed his great satisfaction at having placed his only child as a pupil to his old friend, and had in fact almost charged Mr. Gibson with the guardianship as well as the instruction of his boy, giving him many injunctions which he thought were special in this case; but which Mr. Gibson with a touch of annoyance assured the major were always attended to in every case, with every pupil. But when the poor major ventured to beg that his boy might be considered as one of the family, and that he might spend his evenings in the drawing-room instead of the surgery, Mr. Gibson turned upon him with a direct refusal.

"He must live like the others. I can't have the pestle and mortar carried into the drawing-room, and the place smelling of aloes."

"Must my boy make pills himself, then?" asked the major, ruefully.

"To be sure. The youngest apprentice always does. It's not hard work. He'll have the comfort of thinking he won't have to swallow them himself. And he'll have the run of the pomfret cakes, and the conserve of hips, and on Sundays he shall have a taste of

tamarinds to reward him for his weekly labour at pill-making."

Major Coxe was not quite sure whether Mr. Gibson was not laughing at him in his sleeve; but things were so far arranged, and the real advantages were so great, that he thought it was best to take no notice, but even to submit to the indignity of pill-making. He was consoled for all these rubs by Mr. Gibson's manner at last when the supreme moment of final parting arrived. The doctor did not say much; but there was something of real sympathy in his manner that spoke straight to the father's heart, and an implied "you have trusted me with your boy, and I have accepted the trust in full," in each of the few last words.

Mr. Gibson knew his business and human nature too well to distinguish young Coxe by any overt marks of favouritism; but he could not help showing the lad occasionally that he regarded him with especial interest as the son of a friend. Besides this claim upon his regard, there was something about the young man himself that pleased Mr. Gibson. He was rash and impulsive, apt to speak, hitting the nail on the head sometimes with unconscious cleverness, at other times making gross and startling blunders. Mr. Gibson used to tell him that his motto would always be "kill or cure," and to this Mr. Coxe once made answer that he thought it was the best motto a doctor could have; for if he could not cure the patient, it was surely best to get him out of his misery quietly, and at once. Mr. Wynne looked up in surprise, and observed that he should be afraid that such putting out of misery might be looked upon as homicide by

some people. Mr. Gibson said in a dry tone, that for his part he should not mind the imputation of homicide, but that it would not do to make away with profitable patients in so speedy a manner; and that he thought that as long as they were willing and able to pay two-and-sixpence for the doctor's visit, it was his duty to keep them alive; of course, when they became paupers the case was different. Mr. Wynne pondered over this speech; Mr. Coxe only laughed. At last Mr. Wynne said, —

"But you go every morning, sir, before breakfast to see old Nancy Grant, and you've ordered her this medicine, sir, which is about the most costly in Corbyn's bill?"

"Have you not found out how difficult it is for men to live up to their precepts? You've a great deal to learn yet, Mr. Wynne!" said Mr. Gibson, leaving the surgery as he spoke.

"I never can make the governor out," said Mr. Wynne, in a tone of utter despair. "What are you laughing at Coxey?"

"Oh! I'm thinking how blest you are in having parents who have instilled moral principles into your youthful bosom. You'd go and be poisoning all the paupers off, if you hadn't been told that murder was a crime by your mother; you'd be thinking you were doing as you were bid, and quote old Gibson's words when you came to be tried. 'Please, my lord judge, they were not able to pay for my visits, and so I followed the rules of the profession as taught me by Mr. Gibson, the great surgeon at Hollingford, and poisoned the paupers.'"

"I can't bear that scoffing way of his."

"And I like it. If it wasn't for the governor's fun, and the tamarinds, and something else that I know of, I would run off to India. I hate stifling towns, and sick people, and the smell of drugs, and the stink of pills on my hands; — faugh!"

CHAPTER V.

Calf-Love.

One day, for some reason or other, Mr. Gibson came home unexpectedly. He was crossing the hall, having come in by the garden-door — the garden communicated with the stable-yard, where he had left his horse — when the kitchen-door opened, and the girl who was underling in the establishment, came quickly into the hall with a note in her hand, and made as if she was taking it upstairs; but on seeing her master she gave a little start, and turned back as if to hide herself in the kitchen. If she had not made this movement, so conscious of guilt, Mr. Gibson, who was anything but suspicious, would never have taken any notice of her. As it was, he stepped quickly forwards, opened the kitchen door, and called out "Bethia" so sharply that she could not delay coming forwards.

"Give me that note," he said. She hesitated a little.

"It's for Miss Molly," she stammered out.

"Give it to me!" he repeated more quickly than before. She looked as if she would cry; but still she kept the note tight held behind her back.

"He said as I was to give it into her own hands; and I promised as I would, faithful."

"Cook, go and find Miss Molly. Tell her to come here at once."

He fixed Bethia with his eyes. It was of no use trying to escape: she might have thrown it into the fire, but she had not presence of mind enough. She stood immovable, only her eyes looked any way rather than encounter her master's steady gaze. "Molly, my dear!"

"Papa! I did not know you were at home," said innocent, wondering Molly.

"Bethia, keep your word. Here is Miss Molly; give her the note."

"Indeed, miss, I couldn't help it!"

Molly took the note, but before she could open it, her father said, — "That's all, my dear; you need not read it. Give it to me. Tell those who sent you, Bethia, that all letters for Miss Molly must pass through my hands. Now be off with you, goosey, and go back to where you came from."

"Papa, I shall make you tell me who my correspondent is."

"We'll see about that, by-and-by."

She went a little reluctantly, with ungratified curiosity, upstairs to Miss Eyre, who was still her daily companion, if not her governess. He turned into the empty dining-room, shut the door, broke the seal of the note, and began to read it. It was a flaming love-letter from Mr. Coxe; who professed himself unable to go on seeing her day after day without speaking to her of the passion she had inspired — an "eternal passion," he called it; on reading which Mr. Gibson laughed a little. Would she not look kindly at him? would she not think of him whose only thought was of her? and so on, with a very proper admixture of violent compliments to

her beauty. She was fair, not pale; her eyes were loadstars, her dimples marks of Cupid's finger, &c.

Mr. Gibson finished reading it; and began to think about it in his own mind. "Who would have thought the lad had been so poetical? but, to be sure, there's a 'Shakspeare' in the surgery library: I'll take it away and put 'Johnson's Dictionary' instead. One comfort is the conviction of her perfect innocence — ignorance, I should rather say — for it is easy to see it's the first 'confession of his love,' as he calls it. But it's an awful worry — to begin with lovers so early. Why, she's only just seventeen, — not seventeen, indeed, till July; not for six weeks yet. Sixteen and three-quarters! Why, she's quite a baby. To be sure — poor Jeanie was not so old, and how I did love her!" (Mrs. Gibson's name was Mary, so he must have been referring to some one else.) Then his thoughts wandered back to other days, though he still held the open note in his hand. By-and-by his eyes fell upon it again, and his mind came back to bear upon the present time. "I'll not be hard upon him. I'll give him a hint; he is quite sharp enough to take it. Poor laddie! if I send him away, which would be the wisest course, I do believe he's got no home to go to."

After a little more consideration in the same strain, Mr. Gibson went and sat down at the writing-table and wrote the following formula: —

Master Coxe.

("That 'master' will touch him to the quick," said Mr. Gibson to himself as he wrote the word.)

℞. Verecundiæ ℥i.
Fidelitatis Domesticæ ℥i.
Reticentiæ gr. iij.

M. Capiat hanc dosim ter die in aquâ purâ.

R. Gibson, *Ch.*

Mr. Gibson smiled a little sadly as he re-read his words. "Poor Jeanie," he said aloud. And then he chose out an envelope, enclosed the fervid love-letter, and the above prescription; sealed it with his own sharply-cut seal-ring, R. G., in old English letters, and then paused over the address.

"He'll not like *Master* Coxe outside; no need to put him to unnecessary shame." So the direction on the envelope was —

Edward Coxe, Esq.

Then Mr. Gibson applied himself to the professional business which had brought him home so opportunely and unexpectedly, and afterwards he went back through the garden to the stables; and just as he had mounted his horse, he said to the stable-man, — "Oh! by the way, here's a letter for Mr. Coxe. Don't send it through the women; take it round yourself to the surgery-door, and do it at once."

The slight smile upon his face, as he rode out of the gates, died away as soon as he found himself in the solitude of the lanes. He slackened his speed, and began to think. It was very awkward, he considered, to have a motherless girl growing up into womanhood in the same house with two young men, even if she only met them at meal-times; and all the intercourse

they had with each other was merely the utterance of such words as, "May I help you to potatoes?" or, as Mr. Wynne would persevere in saying, "May I assist you to potatoes?" — a form of speech which grated daily more and more upon Mr. Gibson's ears. Yet Mr. Coxe, the offender in this affair which had just occurred, had to remain for three years more as a pupil in Mr. Gibson's family. He should be the very last of the race. Still there were three years to be got over; and if this stupid passionate calf-love of his lasted, what was to be done? Sooner or later Molly would become aware of it. The contingencies of the affair were so excessively disagreeable to contemplate, that Mr. Gibson determined to dismiss the subject from his mind by a good strong effort. He put his horse to a gallop, and found that the violent shaking over the lanes — paved as they were with round stones, which had been dislocated by the wear and tear of a hundred years — was the very best thing for the spirits, if not for the bones. He made a long round that afternoon, and came back to his home imagining that the worst was over, and that Mr. Coxe would have taken the hint conveyed in the prescription. All that would be needed was to find a safe place for the unfortunate Bethia, who had displayed such a daring aptitude for intrigue. But Mr. Gibson reckoned without his host. It was the habit of the young men to come in to tea with the family in the dining-room, to swallow two cups, munch their bread and toast, and then disappear. This night Mr. Gibson watched their countenances furtively from under his long eye-lashes, while he tried against his wont to keep up a dégagé manner, and a brisk conversation on general subjects. He saw that Mr. Wynne was on the

point of breaking out into laughter, and that red-haired, red-faced Mr. Coxe was redder and fiercer than ever, while his whole aspect and ways betrayed indignation and anger.

"He will have it, will he?" thought Mr. Gibson to himself; and he girded up his loins for the battle. He did not follow Molly and Miss Eyre into the drawing-room as he usually did. He remained where he was, pretending to read the newspaper, while Bethia, her face swelled up with crying, and with an aggrieved and offended aspect, removed the tea-things. Not five minutes after the room was cleared, came the expected tap at the door. "May I speak to you, sir?" said the invisible Mr. Coxe, from outside.

"To be sure. Come in, Mr. Coxe. I was rather wanting to talk to you about that bill of Corbyn's. Pray sit down."

"It is about nothing of that kind, sir, that I wanted — that I wished — No, thank you — I would rather not sit down." He, accordingly, stood in offended dignity. "It is about that letter, sir — that letter with the insulting prescription, sir."

"Insulting prescription! I am surprised at such a word being applied to any prescription of mine — though, to be sure, patients are sometimes offended at being told the nature of their illnesses; and, I daresay, they may take offence at the medicines which their cases require."

"I did not ask you to prescribe for me."

"Oh, no! Then you were the Master Coxe who sent the note through Bethia! Let me tell you it has cost her her place, and was a very silly letter into the bargain."

"It was not the conduct of a gentleman, sir, to intercept it, and to open it, and to read words never addressed to you, sir."

"No!" said Mr. Gibson, with a slight twinkle in his eye and a curl on his lips, not unnoticed by the indignant Mr. Coxe. "I believe I was once considered tolerably good-looking, and I daresay I was as great a coxcomb as any one at twenty; but I don't think that even then I should quite have believed that all those pretty compliments were addressed to myself."

"It was not the conduct of a gentleman, sir," repeated Mr. Coxe, stammering over his words — he was going on to say something more, when Mr. Gibson broke in, —

"And let me tell you, young man," replied Mr. Gibson, with a sudden sternness in his voice, "that what you have done is only excusable in consideration of your youth and extreme ignorance of what are considered the laws of domestic honour. I receive you into my house as a member of the family — you induce one of my servants — corrupting her with a bribe, I have no doubt ——"

"Indeed, sir! I never gave her a penny."

"Then you ought to have done. You should always pay those who do your dirty work."

"Just now, sir, you called it corrupting with a bribe," muttered Mr. Coxe.

Mr. Gibson took no notice of this speech, but went on — "Inducing one of my servants to risk her place, without offering her the slightest equivalent, by begging her to convey a letter clandestinely to my daughter — a mere child."

"Miss Gibson, sir, is nearly seventeen! I heard

you say so only the other day," said Mr. Coxe, aged twenty. Again Mr. Gibson ignored the remark.

"A letter which you were unwilling to have seen by her father, who had tacitly trusted to your honour, by receiving you as an inmate of his house. Your father's son — I know Major Coxe well — ought to have come to me, and have said out openly, Mr. Gibson, I love — or I fancy that I love — your daughter; I do not think it right to conceal this from you, although unable to earn a penny; and with no prospect of an unassisted livelihood, even for myself, for several years, I shall not say a word about my feelings — or fancied feelings — to the very young lady herself. That is what your father's son ought to have said; if, indeed, a couple of grains of reticent silence would not have been better still."

"And if I had said it, sir — perhaps I ought to have said it," said Mr. Coxe, in a hurry of anxiety, "what would have been your answer? Would you have sanctioned my passion, sir?"

"I would have said, most probably — I will not be certain of my exact words in a suppositious case — that you were a young fool, but not a dishonourable young fool, and I should have told you not to let your thoughts run upon a calf-love until you had magnified it into a passion. And I daresay, to make up for the mortification I should have given you, I should have prescribed your joining the Hollingford Cricket Club, and set you at liberty as often as I could on the Saturday afternoons. As it is, I must write to your father's agent in London, and ask him to remove you out of my household repaying the premium, of course, which

will enable you to start afresh in some other doctor's surgery."

"It will so grieve my father," said Mr. Coxe, startled into dismay, if not repentance.

"I see no other course open. It will give Major Coxe some trouble (I shall take care that he is at no extra expense), but what I think will grieve him the most is the betrayal of confidence; for I trusted you, Robert, like a son of my own!" There was something in Mr. Gibson's voice when he spoke seriously, especially when he referred to any feeling of his own — he who so rarely betrayed what was passing in his heart — that was irresistible to most people: the change from joking and sarcasm to tender gravity.

Mr. Coxe hung his head a little, and meditated.

"I do love Miss Gibson," said he, at length. "Who could help it?"

"Mr. Wynne, I hope!" said Mr. Gibson.

"His heart is pre-engaged," replied Mr. Coxe. "Mine was free as air till I saw her."

"Would it tend to cure your — well! passion, we'll say — if she wore blue spectacles at meal-times? I observe you dwell much on the beauty of her eyes."

"You are ridiculing my feelings, Mr. Gibson. Do you forget that you yourself were young once?"

"Poor Jeanie" rose before Mr. Gibson's eyes; and he felt a little rebuked.

"Come, Mr. Coxe, let us see if we can't make a bargain," said he, after a minute or so of silence. "You have done a really wrong thing, and I hope you are convinced of it in your heart, or that you will be when the heat of this discussion is over, and you come to think a little about it. But I won't lose all respect

for your father's son. If you will give me your word that, as long as you remain a member of my family — pupil, apprentice, what you will — you won't again try to disclose your passion — you see I am careful to take your view of what I should call a mere fancy — by word or writing, looks or acts, in any manner whatever, to my daughter, or to talk about your feelings to any one else, you shall remain here. If you cannot give me your word, I must follow out the course I named, and write to your father's agent."

Mr. Coxe stood irresolute.

"Mr. Wynne knows all I feel for Miss Gibson, sir. He and I have no secrets from each other."

"Well, I suppose he must represent the reeds. You know the story of King Midas's barber, who found out that his royal master had the ears of an ass beneath his hyacinthine curls. So the barber, in default of a Mr. Wynne, went to the reeds that grew on the shores of a neighbouring lake, and whispered to them, 'King Midas has the ears of an ass.' But he repeated it so often that the reeds learnt the words, and kept on saying them all day long, till at last the secret was no secret at all. If you keep on telling your tale to Mr. Wynne, are you sure he won't repeat it in his turn?"

"If I pledge my word as a gentleman, sir, I pledge it for Mr. Wynne as well."

"I suppose I must run the risk. But remember how soon a young girl's name may be breathed upon, and sullied. Molly has no mother, and for that very reason she ought to move among you all, as unharmed as Una herself."

"Mr. Gibson, if you wish it, I'll swear it on the Bible," cried the excitable young man.

"Nonsense. As if your word, if it's worth anything, was not enough! We'll shake hands upon it, if you like."

Mr. Coxe came forward eagerly, and almost squeezed Mr. Gibson's ring into his finger.

As he was leaving the room, he said, a little uneasily, "May I give Bethia a crown-piece?"

"No, indeed! Leave Bethia to me. I hope you won't say another word to her while she is here. I shall see that she gets a respectable place when she goes away."

Then Mr. Gibson rang for his horse, and went out on the last visits of the day. He used to reckon that he rode the world around in the course of the year. There were not many surgeons in the county who had so wide a range of practice as he; he went to lonely cottages on the borders of great commons; to farmhouses at the end of narrow country lanes that led to nowhere else, and were overshadowed by the elms and beeches overhead. He attended all the gentry within a circle of fifteen miles round Hollingford; and was the appointed doctor to the still greater families who went up to London every February — as the fashion then was — and returned to their acres in the early weeks of July. He was, of necessity, a great deal from home, and on this soft and pleasant summer evening he felt the absence as a great evil. He was startled into discovering that his little one was growing fast into a woman, and already the passive object of some of the strong interests that affect a woman's life; and he — her mother as well as her father — so much away that he could not guard her as he would have wished. The end of his cogitations was that ride to Hamley

the next morning, when he proposed to allow his daughter to accept Mrs. Hamley's last invitation — an invitation that had been declined at the time.

"You may quote against me the proverb, 'He that will not when he may, when he will he shall have nay.' And I shall have no reason to complain," he had said.

But Mrs. Hamley was only too much charmed with the prospect of having a young girl for a visitor; one whom it would not be a trouble to entertain; who might be sent out to ramble in the gardens, or told to read when the invalid was too much fatigued for conversation; and yet one whose youth and freshness would bring a charm, like a waft of sweet summer air, into her lonely shut-up life. Nothing could be pleasanter, and so Molly's visit to Hamley was easily settled.

"I only wish Osborne and Roger had been at home," said Mrs. Hamley, in her low soft voice. "She may find it dull, being with old people, like the squire and me, from morning till night. When can she come? the darling — I am beginning to love her already!"

Mr. Gibson was very glad in his heart that the young men of the house were out of the way; he did not want his little Molly to be passing from Scylla to Charybdis; and, as he afterwards scoffed at himself for thinking, he had got an idea that all young men were wolves in chase of his one ewe-lamb.

"She knows nothing of the pleasure in store for her," he replied; "and I am sure I don't know what feminine preparations she may think necessary, or how long they may take. You'll remember she is a little ignoramus, and has had no . . . . training in etiquette; our ways at home are rather rough for a girl, I'm

afraid. But I know I could not send her into a kinder atmosphere than this."

When the squire heard from his wife of Mr. Gibson's proposal, he was as much pleased as she at the prospect of their youthful visitor; for he was a man of a hearty hospitality, when his pride did not interfere with its gratification; and he was delighted to think of his sick wife's having such an agreeable companion in her hours of loneliness. After a while he said, — "It's as well the lads are at Cambridge; we might have been having a love-affair if they had been at home."

"Well — and if we had?" asked his more romantic wife.

"It would not have done," said the squire, decidedly. "Osborne will have had a first-rate education — as good as any man in the county — he'll have this property, and he's a Hamley of Hamley; not a family in the shire is as old as we are, or settled on their ground so well. Osborne may marry when he likes. If Lord Hollingford had a daughter, Osborne would have been as good a match as she could have required. It would never do for him to fall in love with Gibson's daughter — I should not allow it. So it's as well he's out of the way."

"Well! perhaps Osborne had better look higher."

"Perhaps! I say he must." The squire brought his hand down with a thump on the table, near him, which made his wife's heart beat hard for some minutes. "And as for Roger," he continued, unconscious of the flutter he had put her into, "he'll have to make his own way, and earn his own bread; and, I'm afraid, he's not getting on very brilliantly at Cambridge. He must not think of falling in love for these ten years."

"Unless he marries a fortune," said Mrs. Hamley, more by way of concealing her palpitation than anything else; for she was unworldly and romantic to a fault.

"No son of mine shall ever marry a wife who is richer than himself with my good will," said the squire again, with emphasis, but without a thump.

"I don't say but what if Roger is gaining five hundred a year by the time he's thirty, he shall not choose a wife with ten thousand pounds down; but I do say, if a boy of mine, with only two hundred a year — which is all Roger will have from us, and that not for a long time — goes and marries a woman with fifty thousand to her portion, I will disown him — it would be just disgusting."

"Not if they loved each other, and their whole happiness depended upon their marrying each other," put in Mrs. Hamley, mildly.

"Pooh! away with love! Nay, my dear, we loved each other so dearly we should never have been happy with any one else; but that's a different thing. People are not like what they were when we were young. All the love nowadays is just silly fancy, and sentimental romance, as far as I can see."

Mr. Gibson thought that he had settled everything about Molly's going to Hamley before he spoke to her about it, which he did not do, until the morning of the day on which Mrs. Hamley expected her. Then he said, — "By the way, Molly! you are to go to Hamley this afternoon; Mrs. Hamley wants you to go to her for a week or two, and it suits me capitally that you should accept her invitation just now."

"Go to Hamley! This afternoon! Papa, you've

got some odd reasons at the back of your head — some mystery, or something. Please, tell me what it is. Go to Hamley for a week or two! Why, I never was from home before this without you in all my life."

"Perhaps not. I don't think you ever walked before you put your feet to the ground. Everything must have a beginning."

"It has something to do with that letter that was directed to me, but that you took out of my hands before I could even see the writing of the direction." She fixed her grey eyes on her father's face, as if she meant to pluck out his secret.

He only smiled and said, — "You're a witch, goosey!"

"Then it had! But if it was a note from Mrs. Hamley, why might I not see it? I have been wondering if you had some plan in your head ever since that day. — Thursday, was not it? You've gone about in a kind of thoughtful, perplexed way, just like a conspirator. Tell me, papa" — coming up at the time, and putting on a beseeching manner — "why might not I see that note? and why am I to go to Hamley all on a sudden?"

"Don't you like to go? Would you rather not?" If she had said that she did not want to go he would have been rather pleased than otherwise, although it would have put him into a great perplexity; but he was beginning to dread the parting from her even for so short a time. However, she replied directly, —

"I don't know — I daresay I shall like it when I have thought a little more about it. Just now I am so startled by the suddenness of the affair, I haven't considered whether I shall like it or not. I shan't like

going away from you, I know. Why am I to go, papa?"

"There are three old ladies sitting somewhere, and thinking about you just at this very minute; one has a distaff in her hands, and is spinning a thread; she has come to a knot in it, and is puzzled what to do with it. Her sister has a great pair of scissors in her hands, and wants — as she always does, when any difficulty arises in the smoothness of the thread — to cut it off short; but the third, who has the most head of the three, plans how to undo the knot; and she it is who has decided that you are to go to Hamley. The others are quite convinced by her arguments; so, as the Fates have decreed that this visit is to be paid, there is nothing left for you and me but to submit."

"That is all nonsense, papa, and you are only making me more curious to find out this hidden reason."

Mr. Gibson changed his tone, and spoke gravely now. "There is a reason, Molly, and one which I do not wish to give. When I tell you this much, I expect you to be an honourable girl, and to try and not even conjecture what the reason may be, — much less endeavour to put little discoveries together till very likely you may find out what I want to conceal."

"Papa, I won't even think about your reason again. But then I shall have to plague you with another question. I have had no new gown this year, and I have outgrown all my last summer frocks. I have only three that I can wear at all. Betty was saying only yesterday that I ought to have some more."

"That'll do that you have got on, won't it? It's a very pretty colour."

"Yes; but, papa" (holding it out as if she was going to dance), "it's made of woollen, and so hot and heavy; and every day it will be getting warmer."

"I wish girls could dress like boys," said Mr. Gibson, with a little impatience. "How is a man to know when his daughter wants clothes? and how is he to rig her out when he finds it out, just when she needs them most and hasn't got them?"

"Ah, that's the question!" said Molly, in some despair.

"Can't you go to Miss Rose's? Doesn't she keep ready-made frocks for girls of your age?"

"Miss Rose! I never had anything from her in my life," replied Molly, in some surprise; for Miss Rose was the great dressmaker and milliner of the little town, and hitherto Betty had made the girl's frocks.

"Well, but it seems people consider you as a young woman now, and so I suppose you must run up milliners' bills like the rest of your kind. Not that you're to get anything anywhere that you can't pay for down in ready money. Here's a ten-pound note; go to Miss Rose's, or Miss anybody's, and get what you want at once. The Hamley carriage is to come for you at two, and anything that isn't quite ready, can easily be sent by their cart on Saturday, when some of their people always come to market. Nay, don't thank me! I don't want to have the money spent, and I don't want you to go and leave me: I shall miss you, I know; it's only hard necessity that drives me to send you a-visiting, and to throw away ten pounds on your clothes. There, go away; you're a plague, and I mean to leave off loving you as fast as I can."

"Papa!" holding up her finger as in warning,

"you're getting mysterious again, and though my honourableness is very strong, I won't promise that it shall not yield to my curiosity if you go on hinting at untold secrets."

"Go away and spend your ten pounds. What did I give it you for but to keep you quiet?"

Miss Rose's ready-made resources and Molly's taste combined, did not arrive at a very great success. She bought a lilac print, because it would wash, and would be cool and pleasant for the mornings; and this Betty could make at home before Saturday. And for high-days and holidays — by which was understood afternoons and Sundays — Miss Rose persuaded her to order a gay-coloured flimsy plaid silk, which she assured her was quite the latest fashion in London, and which Molly thought would please her father's Scotch blood. But when he saw the scrap which she had brought home as a pattern, he cried out that the plaid belonged to no clan in existence, and that Molly ought to have known this by instinct. It was too late to change it, however, for Miss Rose had promised to cut the dress out as soon as Molly left her shop.

Mr. Gibson had hung about the town all the morning instead of going away on his usual distant rides. He passed his daughter once or twice in the street, but he did not cross over when he was on the opposite side — only gave her a look or a nod, and went on his way, scolding himself for his weakness in feeling so much pain at the thought of her absence for a fortnight or so.

"And, after all," thought he, "I'm only where I was when she comes back; at least, if that foolish fellow goes on with his imaginating fancy. She'll have

to come back some time, and if he chooses to imagine himself constant, there's still the devil to pay." Presently he began to hum the air out of the "Beggar's Opera" —

> I wonder any man alive
> Should ever rear a daughter.

CHAPTER VI.

A Visit to the Hamleys.

Of course the news of Miss Gibson's approaching departure had spread through the household before the one o'clock dinner-time came; and Mr. Coxe's dismal countenance was a source of much inward irritation to Mr. Gibson, who kept giving the youth sharp glances of savage reproof for his melancholy face, and want of appetite; which he trotted out, with a good deal of sad ostentation; all of which was lost upon Molly, who was too full of her own personal concerns to have any thought or observation to spare from them, excepting once or twice when she thought of the many days that must pass over before she should again sit down to dinner with her father.

When she named this to him after the meal was done, and they were sitting together in the drawing-room, waiting for the sound of the wheels of the Hamley carriage, he laughed, and said, —

"I'm coming over to-morrow to see Mrs. Hamley; and I daresay I shall dine at their lunch; so you won't have to wait long before you've the treat of seeing the wild beast feed."

Then they heard the approaching carriage.

"Oh, papa," said Molly, catching at his hand, "I do so wish I was not going, now that the time is come."

"Nonsense; don't let us have any sentiment. Have you got your keys? that's more to the purpose."

"Yes; she had got her keys, and her purse; and her little box was put up on the seat by the coachman; and her father handed her in; the door was shut, and she drove away in solitary grandeur, looking back and kissing her hand to her father, who stood at the gate, in spite of his dislike of sentiment, as long as the carriage could be seen. Then he turned into the surgery, and found Mr. Coxe had had his watching too, and had, indeed, remained at the window gazing, moonstruck, at the empty road, up which the young lady had disappeared. Mr. Gibson startled him from his reverie by a sharp, almost venomous, speech about some small neglect of duty a day or two before. That night Mr. Gibson insisted on passing by the bedside of a poor girl whose parents were worn-out by many wakeful anxious nights succeeding to hard-working days.

Molly cried a little, but checked her tears as soon as she remembered how annoyed her father would have been at the sight of them. It was very pleasant driving quickly along in the luxurious carriage, through the pretty green lanes, with dog-roses and honeysuckles so plentiful and fresh in the hedges, that she once or twice was tempted to ask the coachman to stop till she had gathered a nosegay. She began to dread the end of her little journey of seven miles; the only drawback to which was, that her silk was not a true clan-tartan, and a little uncertainty as to Miss Rose's punctuality. At length they came to a village; straggling cottages lined the road, an old church stood on a kind of green, with the public-house close by it; there was a great tree, with a bench all round the trunk, midway between the church gates and the little inn. The wooden

stocks were close to the gates. Molly had long passed the limit of her rides, but she knew this must be the village of Hamley, and they must be very near to the hall.

They swung in at the gates of the park in a few minutes, and drove up through meadow-grass, ripening for hay, — it was no grand aristocratic deer-park this — to the old red-brick hall; not three hundred yards from the high-road. There had been no footman sent with the carriage, but a respectable servant stood at the door, even before they drew up, ready to receive the expected visitor, and take her into the drawing-room where his mistress lay awaiting her.

Mrs. Hamley rose from her sofa to give Molly a gentle welcome; she kept the girl's hand in hers after she had finished speaking, looking into her face, as if studying it, and unconscious of the faint blush she called up on the otherwise colourless cheeks.

"I think we shall be great friends," said she, at length. "I like your face, and I am always guided by first impressions. Give me a kiss, my dear."

It was far easier to be active than passive during this process of "swearing eternal friendship," and Molly willingly kissed the sweet pale face held up to her.

"I meant to have gone and fetched you myself but the heat oppresses me, and I did not feel up to the exertion. I hope you had a pleasant drive?"

"Very," said Molly, with shy conciseness.

"And now I will take you to your room; I have had you put close to me; I thought you would like it better, even though it was a smaller room than the other."

She rose languidly, and wrapping her light shawl

round her yet elegant figure, led the way upstairs. Molly's bedroom opened out of Mrs. Hamley's private sitting-room; on the other side of which was her own bedroom. She showed Molly this easy means of communication, and then, telling her visitor she would await her in the sitting-room, she closed the door, and Molly was left at leisure to make acquaintance with her surroundings.

First of all, she went to the window to see what was to be seen. A flower-garden right below; a meadow of ripe grass just beyond, changing colour in long sweeps, as the soft wind blew over it; great old forest-trees a little on one side; and, beyond them again, to be seen only by standing very close to the side of the window-sill, or by putting her head out, if the window was open, the silver shimmer of a mere, about a quarter of a mile off. On the opposite side to the trees and the mere, the look-out was bounded by the old walls and high-peaked roofs of the extensive farm-buildings. The deliciousness of the early summer silence was only broken by the song of the birds, and the nearer hum of bees. Listening to these sounds, which enhanced the exquisite sense of stillness, and puzzling out objects obscured by distance or shadow, Molly forgot herself, and was suddenly startled into a sense of the present by a sound of voices in the next room — some servant or other speaking to Mrs. Hamley. Molly hurried to unpack her box, and arrange her few clothes in the pretty old-fashioned chest of drawers, which was to serve her as dressing-table as well. All the furniture in the room was as old-fashioned and as well-preserved as it could be. The chintz curtains were Indian calico of the last century

— the colours almost washed out, but the stuff itself exquisitely clean. There was a little strip of bedside carpeting, but the wooden flooring, thus liberally displayed, was of finely-grained oak, so firmly joined, plank to plank, that no grain of dust could make its way into the interstices. There were none of the luxuries of modern days; no writing-table, or sofa, or pier-glass. In one corner of the walls was a bracket, holding an Indian jar filled with pot-pourri; and that and the climbing honeysuckle outside the open window scented the room more exquisitely than any toilette perfumes. Molly laid out her white gown (of last year's date and size) upon the bed, ready for the (to her new) operation of dressing for dinner, and having arranged her hair and dress, and taken out her company worsted-work, she opened the door softly, and saw Mrs. Hamley lying on the sofa.

"Shall we stay up here, my dear? I think it is pleasanter than down below; and then I shall not have to come upstairs again at dressing-time."

"I shall like it very much," replied Molly.

"Ah! you've got your sewing, like a good girl," said Mrs. Hamley. "Now, I don't sew much. I live alone a great deal. You see, both my boys are at Cambridge, and the squire is out of doors all day long — so I have almost forgotten how to sew. I read a great deal. Do you like reading?"

"It depends upon the kind of book," said Molly. "I'm afraid I don't like 'steady reading,' as papa calls it."

"But you like poetry!" said Mrs. Hamley, almost interrupting Molly. "I was sure you did, from your

face. Have you read this last poem of Mrs. Hemans? Shall I read it aloud to you?"

So she began. Molly was not so much absorbed in listening but that she could glance round the room. The character of the furniture was much the same as in her own. Old-fashioned, of handsome material, and faultlessly clean; the age and the foreign appearance of it gave an aspect of comfort and picturesqueness to the whole apartment. On the walls there hung some crayon sketches — portraits. She thought she could make out that one of them was a likeness of Mrs. Hamley, in her beautiful youth. And then she became interested in the poem, and dropped her work, and listened in a manner that was after Mrs. Hamley's own heart. When the reading of the poem was ended, Mrs. Hamley replied to some of Molly's words of admiration, by saying.

"Ah! I think I must read you some of Osborne's poetry some day; under seal of secrecy, remember; but I really fancy they are almost as good as Mrs. Hemans'."

To be nearly as good as Mr. Hemans' was saying as much to the young ladies of that day, as saying that poetry is nearly as good as Tennyson's would be in this. Molly looked up with eager interest.

"Mr. Osborne Hamley? Does your son write poetry?"

"Yes. I really think I may say he is a poet. He is a very brilliant, clever young man, and he quite hopes to get a fellowship at Trinity. He says he is sure to be high up among the wranglers, and that he expects to get one of the Chancellor's medals. That is

his likeness — the one hanging against the wall behind you."

Molly turned round, and saw one of the crayon sketches — representing two boys, in the most youthful kind of jackets and trousers, and falling collars. The elder was sitting down, reading intently. The younger was standing by him, and evidently trying to call the attention of the reader off to some object out of doors — out of the window of the very room in which they were sitting, as Molly discovered when she began to recognize the articles of furniture faintly indicated in the picture.

"I like their faces!" said Molly. "I suppose it is so long ago now, that I may speak of their likenesses to you as if they were somebody else; may not I?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Hamley, as soon as she understood what Molly meant. "Tell me just what you think of them, my dear; it will amuse me to compare your impressions with what they really are."

"Oh! but I did not mean to guess at their characters. I could not do it; and it would be impertinent, if I could. I can only speak about their faces as I see them in the picture."

"Well! tell me what you think of them!"

"The eldest — the reading boy — is very beautiful; but I can't quite make out his face yet, because his head is down, and I can't see the eyes. That is the Mr. Osborne Hamley who writes poetry."

"Yes. He is not quite so handsome now; but he was a beautiful boy. Roger was never to be compared with him."

"No; he is not handsome. And yet I like his face. I can see his eyes. They are grave and solemn-look-

ing; but all the rest of his face is rather merry than otherwise. It looks too steady and sober, too good a face, to go tempting his brother to leave his lesson."

"Ah! but it was not a lesson. I remember the painter, Mr. Green, once saw Osborne reading some poetry, while Roger was trying to persuade him to come out and have a ride in the hay-cart — that was the 'motive' of the picture, to speak artistically. Roger is not much of a reader; at least, he doesn't care for poetry, and books of romance, or sentiment. He is so fond of natural history; and that takes him, like the squire, a great deal out of doors; and when he is in, he is always reading scientific books that bear upon his pursuits. He is a good, steady fellow, though, and gives us great satisfaction, but he is not likely to have such a brilliant career as Osborne."

Molly tried to find out in the picture the characteristics of the two boys, as they were now explained to her by their mother; and in questions and answers about the various drawings hung round the room the time passed away until the dressing-bell rang for the six o'clock dinner.

Molly was rather dismayed by the offers of the maid whom Mrs. Hamley had sent to assist her. "I am afraid they expect me to be very smart," she kept thinking to herself. "If they do, they'll be disappointed; that's all. But I wish my plaid silk gown had been ready."

She looked at herself in the glass with some anxiety, for the first time in her life. She saw a slight, lean figure, promising to be tall; a complexion browner than cream-coloured, although in a year or two it

might have that tint; plentiful curly black hair, tied up in a bunch behind with a rose-coloured ribbon; long, almond-shaped, soft gray eyes, shaded both above and below by curling black eyelashes.

"I don't think I am pretty," thought Molly, as she turned away from the glass; "and yet I am not sure." She would have been sure, if, instead of inspecting herself with such solemnity, she had smiled her own sweet merry smile, and called out the gleam of her teeth, and the charm of her dimples.

She found her way downstairs into the drawing-room in good time; she could look about her, and learn how to feel at home in her new quarters. The room was forty-feet long or so, fitted up with yellow satin at some distant period; high spindle-legged chairs and pembroke-tables abounded. The carpet was of the same date as the curtains, and was thread-bare in many places; and in others was covered with drugget. Stands of plants, great jars of flowers, old Indian china and cabinets gave the room the pleasant aspect it certainly had. And to add to it, there were five high, long windows on one side of the room, all opening to the prettiest bit of flower-garden in the grounds — or what was considered as such — brilliant-coloured, geometrically-shaped beds, converging to a sun-dial in the midst. The squire came in abruptly, and in his morning dress; he stood at the door, as if surprised at the white-robed stranger in possession of his hearth. Then, suddenly remembering himself, but not before Molly had begun to feel very hot, he said —

"Why, God bless my soul, I'd quite forgotten you; you're Miss Gibson, Gibson's daughter, aren't you?

Come to pay us a visit? I'm sure I'm very glad to see you, my dear."

By this time, they had met in the middle of the room, and he was shaking Molly's hand with vehement friendliness, intended to make up for his not knowing her at first.

"I must go and dress, though," said he, looking at his soiled gaiters. "Madam likes it. It's one of her fine London ways, and she's broken me into it at last. Very good plan, though, and quite right to make oneself fit for ladies' society. Does your father dress for dinner, Miss Gibson?" He did not stay to wait for her answer, but hastened away to perform his toilette.

They dined at a small table in a great large room. There were so few articles of furniture in it, and the apartment itself was so vast, that Molly longed for the snugness of the home dining-room; nay, it is to be feared that, before the stately dinner at Hamley Hall came to an end, she even regretted the crowded chairs and tables, the hurry of eating, the quick unformal manner in which everybody seemed to finish their meal as fast as possible, and to return to the work they had left. She tried to think that at six o'clock all the business of the day was ended, and that people might linger if they chose. She measured the distance from the sideboard to the table with her eye, and made allowances for the men who had to carry things backwards and forwards; but, all the same, this dinner appeared to her a wearisome business, prolonged because the squire liked it, for Mrs. Hamley seemed tired out. She ate even less than Molly, and sent for fan and smelling-bottle to amuse herself with, until at length the table-cloth was cleared away, and the dessert

was put upon a mahogany table, polished like a looking-glass.

The squire had hitherto been too busy to talk, except about the immediate concerns of the table, and one or two of the greatest breaks to the usual monotony of his days; a monotony in which he delighted, but which sometimes became oppressive to his wife. Now, however, peeling his orange, he turned to Molly —

"To-morrow, you'll have to do this for me, Miss Gibson."

"Shall I? I'll do it to-day, if you like, sir."

"No; to-day I shall treat you as a visitor, with all proper ceremony. To-morrow I shall send you errands, and call you by your Christian name."

"I shall like that," said Molly.

"I was wanting to call you something less formal than Miss Gibson," said Mrs. Hamley.

"My name is Molly. It is an old-fashioned name, and I was christened Mary. But papa likes Molly."

"That's right. Keep to the good old fashions, my dear."

"Well, I must say I think Mary is prettier than Molly, and quite as old a name, too," said Mrs. Hamley.

"I think it was," said Molly, lowering her voice, and dropping her eyes, "because mamma was Mary, and I was called Molly while she lived."

"Ah, poor thing," said the squire, not perceiving his wife's signs to change the subject, "I remember how sorry every one was when she died; no one thought she was delicate, she had such a fresh colour, till all at once she popped off, as one may say."

"It must have been a terrible blow to your father," said Mrs. Hamley, seeing that Molly did not know what to answer.

"Ay, ay. It came so sudden, so soon after they were married."

"I thought it was nearly four years," said Molly.

"And four years is soon — is a short time to a couple who look to spending their lifetime together. Every one thought Gibson would have married again."

"Hush," said Mrs. Hamley, seeing in Molly's eyes and change of colour how completely this was a new idea to her. But the squire was not so easily stopped.

"Well — I'd perhaps better not have said it, but it's the truth; they did. He's not likely to marry now, so one may say it out. Why, your father is past forty, isn't he?"

"Forty-three. I don't believe he ever thought of marrying again," said Molly, recurring to the idea, as one does to that of danger which has passed by, without one's being aware of it.

"No! I don't believe he did, my dear. He looks to me just like a man who would be constant to the memory of his wife. You must not mind what the squire says."

"Ah! you'd better go away, if you're going to teach Miss Gibson such treason as that against the master of the house."

Molly went into the drawing-room with Mrs. Hamley, but her thoughts did not change with the room. She could not help dwelling on the danger which she fancied she had escaped, and was astonished at her own stupidity at never having imagined such a possibility as her father's second marriage. She felt that

she was answering Mrs. Hamley's remarks in a very unsatisfactory manner.

"There is papa, with the squire!" she suddenly exclaimed. There they were coming across the flower-garden from the stable-yard, her father switching his boots with his riding whip, in order to make them presentable in Mrs. Hamley's drawing-room. He looked so exactly like his usual self, his home-self, that the seeing him in the flesh was the most efficacious way of dispelling the phantom fears of a second wedding, which were beginning to harass his daughter's mind; and the pleasant conviction that he could not rest till he had come over to see how she was going on in her new home, stole into her heart, although he spoke but little to her, and that little was all in a joking tone. After he had gone away, the squire undertook to teach her cribbage, and she was happy enough now to give him all her attention. He kept on prattling while they played; sometimes in relation to the cards; at others telling her of small occurrences which he thought might interest her.

"So you don't know my boys, even by sight. I should have thought you would have done, for they're fond enough of riding into Hollingford; and I know Roger has often enough been to borrow books from your father. Roger is a scientific sort of a fellow. Osborne is clever, like his mother. I shouldn't wonder if he published a book some day. You're not counting right, Miss Gibson. Why, I could cheat you as easily as possible." And so on, till the butler came in with a solemn look, placed a large prayer-book before his master, who huddled the cards away in a hurry, as if caught in an incongruous employment; and then the

maids and men trooped in to prayers — the windows were still open, and the sounds of the solitary corncrake and the owl hooting in the trees, mingling with the words spoken. Then to bed; and so ended the day.

Molly looked out of her chamber window — leaning on the sill, and snuffing up the night odours of the honeysuckle. The soft velvet darkness hid everything that was at any distance from her; although she was as conscious of their presence as if she had seen them.

"I think I shall be very happy here," was in Molly's thoughts, as she turned away at length, and began to prepare for bed. Before long the squire's words, relating to her father's second marriage, came across her, and spoilt the sweet peace of her final thoughts. "Who could he have married?" she asked herself. "Miss Eyre? Miss Browning? Miss Phœbe? Miss Goodenough?" One by one, each of these was rejected for sufficient reasons. Yet the unsatisfied question rankled in her mind, and darted out of ambush to disturb her dreams.

Mrs. Hamley did not come down to breakfast; and Molly found out, with a little dismay, that the squire and she were to have it *tête-à-tête*. On this first morning he put aside his newspapers — one an old established Tory journal, with all the local and country news, which was the most interesting to him; the other the *Morning Chronicle*, which he called his dose of bitters, and which called out many a strong expression and tolerably pungent oath. To-day, however, he was "on his manners," as he afterwards explained to Molly; and he plunged about, trying to find ground for a conversation. He could talk of his wife and his sons, his estate, and his mode of farming; his tenants, and the

mismanagement of the last county election. Molly's interests were her father, Miss Eyre, her garden and pony; in a fainter degree Miss Brownings, the Cumnor Charity School, and the new gown that was to come from Miss Rose's; into the midst of which the one great question, "Who was it that people thought it was possible papa might marry?" kept popping up into her mouth, like a troublesome Jack-in-the-box. For the present, however, the lid was snapped down upon the intruder as often as he showed his head between her teeth. They were very polite to each other during the meal; and it was not a little tiresome to both. When it was ended the squire withdrew into his study to read the untasted newspapers. It was the custom to call the room in which Squire Hamley kept his coats, boots, and gaiters, his different sticks and favourite spud, his gun and fishing-rods, "the study." There was a bureau in it, and a three-cornered arm-chair, but no books were visible. The greater part of them were kept in a large, musty-smelling room, in an unfrequented part of the house; so unfrequented that the housemaid often neglected to open the window-shutters, which looked into a part of the grounds over-grown with the luxuriant growth of shrubs. Indeed, it was a tradition in the servants' hall that, in the late squire's time — he who had been plucked at college — the library windows had been boarded up to avoid paying the window-tax. And when the "young gentlemen" were at home the housemaid, without a single direction to that effect, was regular in her charge of this room; opened the windows and lighted fires daily, and dusted the handsomely-bound volumes, which were really a very fair collection of the standard literature in the

middle of the last century. All the books that had been purchased since that time were held in small bookcases between each two of the drawing-room windows, and in Mrs. Hamley's own sitting-room upstairs. Those in the drawing-room were quite enough to employ Molly; indeed she was so deep in one of Sir Walter Scott's novels that she jumped as if she had been shot, when an hour or so after breakfast the squire came to the gravel-path outside one of the windows, and called to ask her if she would like to come out of doors and go about the garden and home-fields with him.

"It must be a little dull for you, my girl, all by yourself, with nothing but books to look at, in the mornings here; but you see, madam has a fancy for being quiet in the mornings: she told your father about it, and so did I, but I felt sorry for you all the same, when I saw you sitting on the ground all alone in the drawing-room."

Molly had been in the very middle of the *Bride of Lammermoor*, and would gladly have stayed in-doors to finish it, but she felt the squire's kindness all the same. They went in and out of old-fashioned greenhouses, over trim lawns, the squire unlocked the great walled kitchen-garden, and went about giving directions to gardeners; and all the time Molly followed him like a little dog, her mind quite full of "Ravenswood" and "Lucy Ashton." Presently, every place near the house had been inspected and regulated, and the squire was more at liberty to give his attention to his companion, as they passed through the little wood that separated the gardens from the adjoining fields. Molly, too, plucked away her thoughts from the seventeenth century; and, somehow or other, that question, which

had so haunted her before, came out of her lips before she was aware — a literal impromptu, —

"Who did people think papa would marry? That time — long ago — soon after mamma died?"

She dropped her voice very soft and low, as she spoke the last words. The squire turned round upon her, and looked at her face, he knew not why. It was very grave, a little pale, but her steady eyes almost commanded some kind of answer.

"Whew," said he, whistling to gain time; not that he had anything definite to say, for no one had ever had any reason to join Mr. Gibson's name with any known lady: it was only a loose conjecture that had been hazarded on the probabilities — a young widower, with a little girl.

"I never heard of any one — his name was never coupled with any lady's — 'twas only in the nature of things that he should marry again; he may do it yet, for aught I know, and I don't think it would be a bad move either. I told him so, the last time but one he was here."

"And what did he say?" asked breathless Molly.

"Oh: he only smiled and said nothing. You shouldn't take up words so seriously, my dear. Very likely he may never think of marrying again, and if he did, it would be a very good thing both for him and for you!"

Molly muttered something, as if to herself, but the squire might have heard it if he had chosen. As it was, he wisely turned the current of the conversation.

"Look at that!" he said, as they suddenly came upon the mere, or large pond. There was a small island in the middle of the glassy water, on which grew tall trees, dark Scotch firs in the centre, silvery shimmering willows close to the water's edge. "We must

get you punted over there, some of these days. I'm not fond of using the boat at this time of the year, because the young birds are still in the nests among the reeds and water-plants; but we'll go. There are coots and grebes."

"Oh, look, there's a swan!"

"Yes; there are two pair of them here. And in those trees there's both a rookery and a heronry; the herons ought to be here by now, for they're off to the sea in August, but I have not seen one yet. Stay! is not that one — that fellow on a stone, with his long neck bent down, looking into the water?"

"Yes! I think so. I have never seen a heron, only pictures of them."

"They and the rooks are always at war, which does not do for such near neighbours. If both herons leave the nest they are building, the rooks come and tear it to pieces; and once Roger showed me a long straggling fellow of a heron, with a flight of rooks after him, with no friendly purpose in their minds, I'll be bound. Roger knows a deal of natural history, and finds out queer things sometimes. He'd have been off a dozen times during this walk of ours, if he'd been here: his eyes are always wandering about, and see twenty things where I only see one. Why! I've known him bolt into a copse because he saw something fifteen yards off — some plant, maybe, which he'd tell me was very rare, though I should say I'd seen its marrow at every turn in the woods; and, if we came upon such a thing as this," touching a delicate film of a cobweb upon a leaf with his stick, as he spoke, "why, he could tell you what insect or spider made it, and if it lived in rotten fir-wood, or in a cranny of good sound timber,

or deep down in the ground, or up in the sky, or anywhere. It's a pity they don't take honours in Natural History at Cambridge. Roger would be safe enough if they did."

"Mr. Osborne Hamley is very clever, is he not?" Molly asked, timidly.

"Oh, yes. Osborne's a bit of a genius. His mother looks for great things from Osborne. I'm rather proud of him myself. He'll get a Trinity fellowship, if they play him fair. As I was saying at the magistrates' meeting yesterday, 'I've got a son who will make a noise at Cambridge, or I'm very much mistaken.' Now, isn't it a queer quip of Nature," continued the squire, turning his honest face towards Molly, as if he was going to impart a new idea to her, "that I, a Hamley of Hamley, straight in descent from nobody knows where — the Heptarchy, they say — What's the date of the Heptarchy?"

"I don't know," said Molly, startled at being thus appealed to.

"Well! it was some time before King Alfred, because he was the King of all England, you know; but, as I was saying, here am I, of as good and as old a descent as any man in England, and I doubt if a stranger, to look at me, would take me for a gentleman, with my red face, great hands and feet, and thick figure, fourteen stone, and never less than twelve even when I was a young man; and there's Osborne, who takes after his mother, who couldn't tell her great-grandfather from Adam, bless her; and Osborne has a girl's delicate face, and a slight make, and hands and feet as small as a lady's. He takes after madam's side, who, as I said, can't tell who was their grandfather. Now, Roger is like me, a Hamley of Hamley, and no one who sees

him in the street will ever think that red-brown, big-boned, clumsy chap is of gentle blood. Yet all those Cumnor people, you make such ado of in Hollingford, are mere muck of yesterday. I was talking to madam the other day about Osborne's marrying a daughter of Lord Hollingford's — that's to say, if he had a daughter — he's only got boys, as it happens; but I'm not sure if I should consent to it. I really am not sure; for you see Osborne will have had a first-rate education, and his family dates from the Heptarchy, while I should be glad to know where the Cumnor folk were in the time of Queen Anne?" He walked on, pondering the question of whether he could have given his consent to this impossible marriage; and after some time, and when Molly had quite forgotten the subject to which he alluded, he broke out with — "No! I'm sure I should have looked higher. So, perhaps, it's as well my Lord Hollingford has only boys."

After a while, he thanked Molly for her companionship, with old-fashioned courtesy; and told her that he thought, by this time, madam would be up and dressed, and glad to have her young visitor with her. He pointed out the deep purple house, with its stone facings, as it was seen at some distance between the trees, and watched her protectingly on her way along the field-paths.

"That's a nice girl of Gibson's," quoth he to himself. "But what a tight hold the wench got of the notion of his marrying again! One had need be on one's guard as to what one says before her. To think of her never having thought of the chance of a stepmother. To be sure, a stepmother to a girl is a different thing to a second wife to a man!"

CHAPTER VII.

Foreshadows of Love Perils.

If Squire Hamley had been unable to tell Molly who had ever been thought of as her father's second wife, fate was all this time preparing an answer of a pretty positive kind to her wondering curiosity. But fate is a cunning hussy, and builds up her plans as imperceptibly as a bird builds her nest; and with much the same kind of unconsidered trifles. The first "trifle" of an event was the disturbance which Jenny (Mr. Gibson's cook) chose to make at Bethia's being dismissed. Bethia was a distant relation and protégée of Jenny's, and she chose to say it was Mr. Coxe the tempter who ought to have "been sent packing," not Bethia the tempted, the victim. In this view there was quite enough plausibility to make Mr. Gibson feel that he had been rather unjust. He had, however, taken care to provide Bethia with another situation, to the full as good as that which she held in his family. Jenny, nevertheless, chose to give warning; and though Mr Gibson knew full well from former experience that her warnings were words, not deeds, he hated the discomfort, the uncertainty, — the entire disagreeableness of meeting a woman at any time in his house, who wore a grievance and an injury upon her face as legibly as Jenny took care to do.

Down into the middle of this small domestic trouble came another, and one of greater consequence. Miss

Eyre had gone with her old mother, and her orphan nephews and nieces, to the sea-side, during Molly's absence, which was only intended at first to last for a fortnight. After about ten days of this time had elapsed, Mr. Gibson received a beautifully written, beautifully worded, admirably folded, and most neatly sealed letter from Miss Eyre. Her eldest nephew had fallen ill of scarlet fever, and there was every probability that the younger children would be attacked by the same complaint. It was distressing enough for poor Miss Eyre — this additional expense, this anxiety — the long detention from home which the illness involved. But she said not a word of any inconvenience to herself; she only apologized with humble sincerity for her inability to return at the appointed time to her charge in Mr. Gibson's family; meekly adding, that perhaps it was as well, for Molly had never had the scarlet fever, and even if Miss Eyre had been able to leave the orphan children to return to her employments, it might not have been a safe or a prudent step.

"To be sure not," said Mr. Gibson, tearing the letter in two, and throwing it into the hearth, where he soon saw it burnt to ashes. "I wish I'd a five-pound house and not a woman within ten miles of me. I might have some peace then." Apparently, he forgot Mr. Coxe's powers of making mischief; but indeed he might have traced that evil back to the unconscious Molly. The martyr-cook's entrance to take away the breakfast things, which she announced by a heavy sigh, roused Mr. Gibson from thought to action.

"Molly must stay a little longer at Hamley," he resolved. "They've often asked for her, and now they'll have enough of her, I think. But I can't have

her back here just yet; and so the best I can do for her is to leave her where she is. Mrs. Hamley seems very fond of her, and the child is looking happy, and stronger in health. I'll ride round by Hamley to-day at any rate, and see how the land lies."

He found Mrs. Hamley lying on a sofa placed under the shadow of the great cedar-tree on the lawn. Molly was flitting about her, gardening away under her directions; tying up the long sea-green stalks of bright budded carnations, snipping off dead roses.

"Oh! here's papa!" she cried out, joyfully, as he rode up to the white paling which separated the trim lawn and trimmer flowergarden from the rough park-like ground in front of the house.

"Come in — come here — through the drawing-room window," said Mrs. Hamley, raising herself on her elbow. "We've got a rose-tree to show you that Molly has budded all by herself. We are both so proud of it."

So Mr. Gibson rode round to the stables, left his horse there, and made his way through the house to the open-air summer-parlour under the cedar-tree, where there were chairs, table, books, and tangled work. Somehow, he rather disliked asking for Molly to prolong her visit; so he determined to swallow his bitter first, and then take the pleasure of the delicious day, the sweet repose, the murmurous, scented air. Molly stood by him, her hand on his shoulder. He sate opposite to Mrs. Hamley.

"I've come here to-day to ask for a favour," he began.

"Granted before you name it. Am not I a bold woman?"

He smiled and bowed, but went straight on with his speech.

"Miss Eyre, who has been Molly's governess, I suppose I must call her — for many years, writes to-day to say that one of the little nephews she took with her to Newport while Molly was staying here, has caught the scarlet fever."

"I guess your request. I make it before you do. I beg for dear little Molly to stay on here. Of course Miss Eyre can't come back to you; and of course Molly must stay here!"

"Thank you; thank you very much. That was my request."

Molly's hand stole down to his, and nestled in that firm compact grasp.

"Papa! — Mrs. Hamley! — I know you'll both understand me — but mayn't I go home? I am very happy here; but — oh papa! I think I should like to be at home with you best."

An uncomfortable suspicion flashed across his mind. He pulled her round, and looked straight and piercingly into her innocent face. Her colour came at his unwonted scrutiny, but her sweet eyes were filled with wonder, rather than with any feeling which he dreaded to find. For an instant he had doubted whether young red-headed Mr. Coxe's love might not have called out a response in his daughter's breast; but he was quite clear now.

"Molly, you're rude to begin with. I don't know how you're to make your peace with Mrs. Hamley, I'm sure. And in the next place, do you think you're wiser than I am; or that I don't want you at home,

if all other things were comformable? Stay where you are, and be thankful."

Molly knew him well enough to be certain that the prolongation of her visit at Hamley was quite a decided affair in his mind; and then she was smitten with a sense of ingratitude. She left her father, and went to Mrs. Hamley, and bent over her and kissed her; but she did not speak. Mrs. Hamley took hold of her hand, and made room on the sofa for her.

"I was going to have asked for a longer visit the next time you came, Mr. Gibson. We are such happy friends, are not we, Molly? and now, that this good little nephew of Miss Eyre's ——"

"I wish he was whipped," said Mr. Gibson.

"— has given us such a capital reason, I shall keep Molly for a real long visitation. You must come over and see us very often. There's a room here for you always, you know; and I don't see why you should not start on your rounds from Hamley every morning, just as well as from Hollingford."

"Thank you. If you hadn't been so kind to my little girl, I might be tempted to say something rude in answer to your last speech."

"Pray say it. You won't be easy till you have given it out, I know."

"Mrs. Hamley has found out from whom I get my rudeness," said Molly, triumphantly. "It's an hereditary quality."

"I was going to say that proposal of yours that I should sleep at Hamley was just like a woman's idea — all kindness, and no common sense. How in the world would my patients find me out, seven miles from my

accustomed place? They'd be sure to send for some other doctor, and I should be ruined in a month."

"Could not they send on here? A messenger costs very little."

"Fancy old Goody Henbury struggling up to my surgery, groaning at every step, and then being told to just step on seven miles farther! Or take the other end of society: — I don't think my Lady Cumnor's smart groom would thank me for having to ride on to Hamley every time his mistress wants me."

"Well, well, I submit. I am a woman. Molly, thou art a woman! Go and order some strawberries and cream for this father of yours. Such humble offices fall within the province of women. Strawberries and cream are all kindness and no common sense, for they'll give him a horrid fit of indigestion."

"Please speak for yourself, Mrs. Hamley," said Molly, merrily. "I ate — oh, such a great basketful yesterday, and the squire went himself to the dairy and brought out a great bowl of cream, when he found me at my busy work. And I'm as well as ever I was, to-day, and never had a touch of indigestion near me."

"She's a good girl," said her father, when she had danced out of hearing. The words were not quite an inquiry, he was so certain of his answer. There was a mixture of tenderness and trust in his eyes, as he awaited the reply, which came in a moment.

"She's a darling. I cannot tell you how fond the squire and I are of her; both of us. I am so delighted to think she is not to go away for a long time. The first thing I thought of this morning when I wakened up, was that she would soon have to return to you,

unless I could persuade you into leaving her with me a little longer. And now she must stay — oh, two months at least."

It was quite true that the squire had become very fond of Molly. The chance of having a young girl dancing and singing inarticulate ditties about the house and garden, was indescribable in its novelty to him. And then Molly was so willing and so wise; ready both to talk and to listen at the right times. Mrs. Hamley was quite right in speaking of her husband's fondness for Molly. But either she herself chose a wrong time for telling him of the prolongation of the girl's visit, or one of the fits of temper to which he was liable, but which he generally strove to check in the presence of his wife, was upon him; at any rate, he received the news in anything but a gracious frame of mind.

"Stay longer! Did Gibson ask for it?"

"Yes! I don't see what else is to become of her; Miss Eyre away and all. It's a very awkward position for a motherless girl like her to be at the head of a household with two young men in it."

"That's Gibson's look-out; he should have thought of it before taking pupils, or apprentices, or whatever he calls them."

"My dear squire! why, I thought you'd be as glad as I was — as I am to keep Molly. I asked her to stay for an indefinite time; two months at least."

"And to be in the house with Osborne! Roger, too, will be at home."

By the cloud in the squire's eyes, Mrs. Hamley read his mind.

"Oh, she's not at all the sort of girl young men of their age would take to. We like her because we

see what she really is; but lads of one and two and twenty want all the accessories of a young woman."

"Want what?" growled the squire.

"Such things as becoming dress, style of manner. They would not at their age even see that she is pretty; their ideas of beauty would include colour."

"I suppose all that's very clever; but I don't understand it. All I know is, that it's a very dangerous thing to shut two young men of one and three and twenty up in a country-house like this with a girl of seventeen — choose what her gowns may be like, or her hair, or her eyes. And I told you particularly I didn't want Osborne, or either of them, indeed, to be falling in love with her. I'm very much annoyed."

Mrs. Hamley's face fell; she became a little pale.

"Shall we make arrangements for their stopping away while she is here; staying up at Cambridge, or reading with some one? going abroad for a month or two?"

"No; you've been reckoning this ever so long on their coming home. I've seen the marks of the weeks on your almanack. I'd sooner speak to Gibson, and tell him he must take his daughter away, for it's not convenient to us —"

"My dear Roger! I beg you will do no such thing. It will be so unkind; it will give the lie to all I said yesterday. Don't, please, do that. For my sake, don't speak to Mr. Gibson!"

"Well, well, don't put yourself in a flutter," for he was afraid of her becoming hysterical; "I'll speak to Osborne when he comes home, and tell him how much I should dislike anything of the kind."

"And Roger is always far too full of his natural

history and comparative anatomy, and messes of that sort, to be thinking of falling in love with Venus herself. He has not the sentiment and imagination of Osborne."

"Ah, you don't know; you never can be sure about a young man! But with Roger it wouldn't so much signify. He would know he couldn't marry for years to come."

All that afternoon the squire tried to steer clear of Molly, to whom he felt himself to have been an inhospitable traitor. But she was so perfectly unconscious of his shyness of her, so merry and sweet in her behaviour as a welcome guest, never distrusting him for a moment, however gruff he might be, that by the next morning she had completely won him round, and they were quite on the old terms again. At breakfast this very morning, a letter was passed from the squire to his wife, and back again, without a word as to its contents; but —

"Fortunate!"

"Yes! very!"

Little did Molly apply these expressions to the piece of news Mrs. Hamley told her in the course of the day; namely, that her son Osborne had received an invitation to stay with a friend in the neighbourhood of Cambridge, and perhaps to make a tour on the Continent with him subsequently; and that, consequently, he would not accompany his brother when Roger came home.

Molly was very sympathetic.

"Oh, dear! I am so sorry!"

Mrs. Hamley was thankful her husband was not present, Molly spoke the words so heartily.

"You have been thinking so long of his coming home. I am afraid it is a great disappointment."

Mrs. Hamley smiled — relieved.

"Yes! it is a disappointment certainly, but we must think of Osborne's pleasure. And with his poetical mind, he will write us such delightful travelling letters. Poor fellow! he must be going into the examination to-day! Both his father and I feel sure, though, that he will be a high wrangler. Only — I should like to have seen him, my own dear boy. But it is best as it is."

Molly was a little puzzled by this speech, but soon put it out of her head. It was a disappointment to her, too, that she should not see this beautiful, brilliant young man, his mother's hero. From time to time her maiden fancy had dwelt upon what he would be like; how the lovely boy of the picture in Mrs. Hamley's dressing-room would have changed in the ten years that had elapsed since the likeness was taken; if he would read poetry aloud; if he would ever read his own poetry. However, in the never-ending feminine business of the day, she soon forgot her own disappointment; it only came back to her on first wakening the next morning, as a vague something that was not quite so pleasant as she had anticipated, and then was banished as a subject of regret. Her days at Hamley were well filled up with the small duties that would have belonged to a daughter of the house had there been one. She made breakfast for the lonely squire, and would willingly have carried up madame's, but that daily piece of work belonged to the squire, and was jealously guarded by him. She read the smaller print of the newspapers aloud to him, city articles, money

and corn markets included. She strolled about the gardens with him, gathering fresh flowers, meanwhile, to deck the drawing-room against Mrs. Hamley should come down. She was her companion when she took her drives in the close carriage; they read poetry and mild literature together in Mrs. Hamley's sitting-room upstairs. She was quite clever at cribbage now, and could beat the squire if she took pains. Besides these things, there were her own independent ways of employing herself. She used to try to practise a daily hour on the old grand piano in the solitary drawing-room, because she had promised Miss Eyre she would do so. And she had found her way into the library, and used to undo the heavy bars of the shutters if the housemaid had forgotten this duty, and mount the ladder, sitting on the steps, for an hour at a time, deep in some book of the old English classics. The summer days were very short to this happy girl of seventeen.

CHAPTER VIII.

Drifting into Danger.

On Thursday, the quiet country household was stirred through all its fibres with the thought of Roger's coming home. Mrs. Hamley had not seemed quite so well, or quite in such good spirits for two or three days before; and the squire himself had appeared to be put out without any visible cause. They had not chosen to tell Molly that Osborne's name had only appeared very low down in the mathematical tripos. So all that their visitor knew was that something was out of tune, and she hoped that Roger's coming home would set it to rights, for it was beyond the power of her small cares and wiles.

On Thursday, the housemaid apologized to her for some slight negligence in her bedroom, by saying she had been busy scouring Mr. Roger's rooms. "Not but what they were as clean as could be beforehand; but mistress would always have the young gentlemen's rooms cleaned afresh before they came home. If it had been Mr. Osborne, the whole house would have had to be done; but to be sure he was the eldest son, so it was but likely." Molly was amused at this testimony to the rights of heirship; but somehow she herself had fallen into the family manner of thinking that nothing was too great or too good for "the eldest son." In his father's eyes, Osborne was the representative of the ancient house of Hamley of Hamley,

the future owner of the land which had been theirs for a thousand years. His mother clung to him because they two were cast in the same mould, both physically and mentally — because he bore her maiden name. She had indoctrinated Molly with her faith, and, in spite of her amusement at the housemaid's speech, the girl visitor would have been as anxious as any one to show her feudal loyalty to the heir, if indeed it had been he that was coming. After luncheon, Mrs. Hamley went to rest, in preparation for Roger's return; and Molly also retired to her own room, feeling that it would be better for her to remain there until dinner-time, and so to leave the father and mother to receive their boy in privacy. She took a book of MS. poems with her; they were all of Osborne Hamley's composition; and his mother had read some of them aloud to her young visitor more than once. Molly had asked permission to copy one or two of those which were her greatest favourites; and this quiet summer afternoon she took this copying for her employment, sitting at the pleasant open window, and losing herself in dreamy out-looks into the gardens and woods, quivering in the noontide heat. The house was so still, in its silence it might have been the "moated grange;" the bomming buzz of the blue flies, in the great staircase window, seemed the loudest noise indoors. And there was scarcely a sound out-of-doors but the humming of bees, in the flower-beds below the window. Distant voices from the far-away fields where they were making hay — the scent of which came in sudden wafts distinct from that of the nearer roses and honeysuckles — these merry piping voices just made Molly feel the depth of the present silence. She had

left off copying, her hand weary with the unusual exertion of so much writing, and she was lazily trying to learn one or two of the poems off by heart.

> I asked of the wind, but answer made it none,
> Save its accustomed sad and solitary moan —

she kept saying to herself, losing her sense of whatever meaning the words had ever had, in the repetition which had become mechanical. Suddenly there was the snap of a shutting gate; wheels crackling on the dry gravel, horses' feet on the drive; a loud cheerful voice in the house, coming up through the open windows, the hall, the passages, the staircase, with unwonted fulness and roundness of tone. The entrance-hall downstairs was paved with diamonds of black and white marble; the low wide staircase that went in short flights around the hall, till you could look down upon the marble floor from the top story of the house, was uncarpeted — uncovered. The squire was too proud of his beautifully-joined oaken flooring to cover this staircase up unnecessarily; not to say a word of the usual state of want of ready money to expend upon the decorations of his house. So, through the undraperied hollow square of the hall and staircase every sound ascended clear and distinct; and Molly heard the squire's glad "Hallo! here he is," and madame's softer, more plaintive voice; and then the loud, full, strange tone, which she knew must be Roger's. Then there was an opening and shutting of doors, and only a distant buzz of talking. Molly began again —

> I asked of the wind, but answer made it none.

And this time she had nearly finished learning the poem, when she heard Mrs. Hamley come hastily into

her sitting-room that adjoined Molly's bedroom, and burst out into an irrepressible half-hysterical fit of sobbing. Molly was too young to have any complication of motives which should prevent her going at once to try and give what comfort she could. In an instant she was kneeling at Mrs. Hamley's feet, holding the poor lady's hands, kissing them, murmuring soft words; which, all unmeaning as they were of aught but sympathy with the untold grief, did Mrs. Hamley good. She checked herself, smiling sadly at Molly through the midst of her thick-coming sobs.

"It's only Osborne," said she, at last. "Roger has been telling us about him."

"What about him?" asked Molly, eagerly.

"I knew on Monday; we had a letter — he said he had not done so well as we had hoped — as he had hoped himself, poor fellow! He said he had just passed, but was only low down among the *junior optimes*, and not where he had expected, and had led us to expect. But the squire has never been at college, and does not understand college terms, and he has been asking Roger all about it, and Roger has been telling him, and it has made him so angry. But the squire hates college slang; — he has never been there, you know; and he thought poor Osborne was taking it too lightly, and he has been asking Roger about it, and Roger —"

There was a fresh fit of the sobbing crying. Molly burst out, —

"I don't think Mr. Roger should have told; he had no need to begin so soon about his brother's failure. Why, he hasn't been in the house an hour!"

"Hush, hush, love!" said Mrs. Hamley. "Roger is so good. You don't understand. The squire would

begin and ask questions before Roger had tasted food — as soon as ever we had got into the dining-room. And all he said — to me, at any rate — was that Osborne was nervous, and that if he could only have gone in for the Chancellor's medals, he would have carried all before him. But Roger said that after failing like this, he is not very likely to get a fellowship, which the squire had placed his hopes on. Osborne himself seemed so sure of it, that the squire can't understand it, and is seriously angry, and growing more so the more he talks about it. He has kept it in two or three days, and that never suits him. He is always better when he is angry about a thing at once, and does not let it smoulder in his mind. Poor, poor Osborne! I did wish he had been coming straight home, instead of going to these friends of his; I thought I could have comforted him. But now I'm glad, for it will be better to let his father's anger cool first."

So talking out what was in her heart, Mrs. Hamley became more composed; and at length she dismissed Molly to dress for dinner, with a kiss, saying, —

"You're a real blessing to mothers, child! You give one such pleasant sympathy, both in one's gladness and in one's sorrow; in one's pride (for I was so proud last week, so confident), and in one's disappointment. And now your being a fourth at dinner will keep us off that sore subject; there are times when a stranger in the household is a wonderful help."

Molly thought over all that she had heard, as she was dressing and putting on the terrible, over-smart plaid gown in honour of the new arrival. Her unconscious fealty to Osborne was not in the least shaken by his having come to grief at Cambridge. Only she

was indignant — with or without reason — against Roger, who seemed to have brought the reality of bad news as an offering of first-fruits on his return home.

She went down into the drawing-room with anything but a welcome to him in her heart. He was standing by his mother; the squire had not yet made his appearance. Molly thought that the two were hand in hand when she first opened the door, but she could not be quite sure. Mrs. Hamley came a little forwards to meet her, and introduced her in so fondly intimate a way to her son, that Molly, innocent and simple, knowing nothing but Hollingford manners, which were anything but formal, half put out her hand to shake hands with one of whom she had heard so much — the son of such kind friends. She could only hope he had not seen the movement, for he made no attempt to respond to it; only bowed.

He was a tall powerfully-made young man, giving the impression of strength more than elegance. His face was rather square, ruddy-coloured (as his father had said), hair and eyes brown — the latter rather deep-set beneath his thick eyebrows; and he had a trick of wrinkling up his eyelids when he wanted particularly to observe anything, which made his eyes look even smaller still at such times. He had a large mouth, with excessively mobile lips; and another trick of his was, that when he was amused at anything, he resisted the impulse to laugh, by a droll manner of twitching and puckering up his mouth, till at length the sense of humour had its way, and his features relaxed, and he broke into a broad sunny smile; his beautiful teeth — his only beautiful feature — breaking out with a white gleam upon the red-brown countenance. These two

tricks of his — of crumpling up the eyelids, so as to concentrate the power of sight, which made him look stern and thoughtful; and the odd twitching of the lips that was preliminary to a smile, which made him look intensely merry — gave the varying expressions of his face a greater range "from grave to gay, from lively to severe," than is common to most men. To Molly, who was not finely discriminative in her glances at the stranger this first night, he simply appeared "heavy-looking, clumsy," and "a person she was sure she should never get on with." He certainly did not seem to care much what impression he made upon his mother's visitor. He was at that age when young men admire a formed beauty more than a face with any amount of future capability of loveliness, and when they are morbidly conscious of the difficulty of finding subjects of conversation in talking to girls in a state of feminine hobbledehoyhood. Besides, his thoughts were full of other subjects, which he did not intend to allow to ooze out in words, yet he wanted to prevent any of that heavy silence which he feared might be impending — with an angry and displeased father, and a timorous and distressed mother. He only looked upon Molly as a badly-dressed, and rather awkward girl, with black hair and an intelligent face, who might help him in the task he had set himself of keeping up a bright general conversation during the rest of the evening; might help him — if she would, but she would not. She thought him unfeeling in his talkativeness; his constant flow of words upon indifferent subjects was a wonder and a repulsion to her. How could he go on so cheerfully while his mother sat there, scarcely eating anything, and doing her best, with ill-success, to

swallow down the tears that would keep rising to her eyes; when his father's heavy brow was deeply clouded, and he evidently cared nothing — at first at least — for all the chatter his son poured forth? Had Mr. Roger Hamley no sympathy in him? She would show that she had some, at any rate. So she quite declined the part, which he had hoped she would have taken, of respondent, and possible questioner; and his work became more and more like that of a man walking in a quagmire. Once the squire roused himself to speak to the butler; he felt the need of outward stimulus — of a better vintage than usual.

"Bring up a bottle of the Burgundy with the yellow seal."

He spoke low; he had no spirit to speak in his usual voice. The butler answered in the same tone. Molly sitting near them, and silent herself, heard what they said.

"If you please, sir, there are not above six bottles of that seal left; and it is Mr. Osborne's favourite wine."

The squire turned round with a growl in his voice.

"Bring up a bottle of the Burgundy with the yellow seal, as I said."

The butler went away wondering. "Mr. Osborne's" likes and dislikes had been the law of the house in general until now. If he had liked any particular food or drink, any seat or place, any special degree of warmth or coolness, his wishes were to be attended to; for he was the heir, and he was delicate, and he was the clever one of the family. All the out-of-doors men would have said the same. Mr. Osborne wished a tree cut down, or kept standing, or had

such-and-such a fancy about the game, or desired something unusual about the horses; and they had all to attend to it as if it were law. But to-day the Burgundy with the yellow seal was to be brought; and it was brought; Molly testified with quiet vehemence of action; she never took wine, so she need not have been afraid of the man's pouring it into her glass; but as an open mark of fealty to the absent Osborne, however little it might be understood, she placed the palm of her small brown hand over the top of the glass, and held it there till the wine had gone round, and Roger and his father were in full enjoyment of it.

After dinner, too, the gentlemen lingered long over their dessert, and Molly heard them laughing; and then she saw them loitering about in the twilight out-of-doors; Roger hatless, his hands in his pockets, lounging by his father's side, who was now able to talk in his usual loud and cheerful way, forgetting Osborne. *Væ victis!*

And so in mute opposition on Molly's side, in polite indifference, scarcely verging upon kindliness on his, Roger and she steered clear of each other. He had many occupations in which he needed no companionship, even if she had been qualified to give it. The worst was, that she found he was in the habit of occupying the library, her favourite retreat, in the mornings before Mrs. Hamley came down. She opened the half-closed door a day or two after his return home, and found him busy among books and papers, with which the large leather-covered table was strewn; and she softly withdrew before he could turn his head and see her, so as to distinguish her from one of the house-

maids. He rode out every day, sometimes with his father about the outlying fields, sometimes far away for a good gallop. Molly would have enjoyed accompanying him on these occasions, for she was very fond of riding; and there had been some talk of sending for her habit and grey pony when first she came to Hamley; only the squire, after some consideration, had said he so rarely did more than go slowly from one field to another, where his labourers were at work, that he feared she would find such slow work — ten minutes riding through heavy land, twenty minutes sitting still on horseback, listening to the directions he should have to give to his men — rather dull. Now, when if she had had her pony here she might have ridden out with Roger, without giving him any trouble — she would have taken care of that — nobody seemed to think of renewing the proposal.

Altogether it was pleasanter before he came home.

Her father came over pretty frequently; sometimes there were long unaccountable absences, it was true; when his daughter began to fidget after him, and to wonder what had become of him. But when he made his appearance he had always good reasons to give; and the right she felt that she had to his familiar household tenderness; the power she possessed of fully understanding the exact value of both his words and his silence, made these glimpses of intercourse with him inexpressibly charming. Latterly her burden had always been, "When may I come home, papa?" It was not that she was unhappy, or uncomfortable; she was passionately fond of Mrs. Hamley, she was a favourite of the squire's, and could not as yet fully understand why some people were so much afraid of

him; and as for Roger, if he did not add to her pleasure, he scarcely took away from it. But she wanted to be at home once more. The reason why she could not tell; but this she knew full well. Mr. Gibson reasoned with her till she was weary of being completely convinced that it was right and necessary for her to stay where she was. And then with an effort she stopped the cry upon her tongue, for she saw that its repetition harassed her father.

During this absence of hers Mr. Gibson was drifting into matrimony. He was partly aware of whither he was going; and partly it was like the soft floating movement of a dream. He was more passive than active in the affair; though, if his reason had not fully approved of the step he was tending to — if he had not believed that a second marriage was the very best way of cutting the Gordian knot of domestic difficulties, he could have made an effort without any great trouble, and extricated himself without pain from the mesh of circumstances. It happened in this manner: —

Lady Cumnor having married her two eldest daughters, found her labours as a chaperone to Lady Harriet, the youngest, considerably lightened by co-operation; and, at length, she had leisure to be an invalid. She was, however, too energetic to allow herself this indulgence constantly; only she permitted herself to break down occasionally after a long course of dinners, late hours, and London atmosphere: and then, leaving Lady Harriet with either Lady Cuxhaven or Lady Agnes Manners, she betook herself to the comparative quiet of the Towers, where she found occupation in doing her benevolence, which was sadly

neglected in the hurly-burly of London. This particular summer she had broken down earlier than usual, and longed for the repose of the country. She believed that her state of health, too, was more serious than previously; but she did not say a word of this to her husband or daughters; reserving her confidence for Mr. Gibson's ears. She did not wish to take Lady Harriet away from the gaieties of town, which she was thoroughly enjoying, by any complaint of hers, which might, after all, be ill-founded; and yet she did not quite like being without a companion in the three weeks or a month that might intervene before her family would join her at the Towers, especially as the annual festivity to the school visitors was impending; and both the school and the visit of the ladies connected with it, had rather lost the zest of novelty.

"Thursday the 19th, Harriet," said Lady Cumnor, meditatively; "what do you say to coming down to the Towers on the 18th, and helping me over that long day; you could stay in the country till Monday, and have a few days' rest and good air; you would return a great deal fresher to the remainder of your gaieties. Your father would bring you down, I know: indeed, he is coming naturally.

"Oh, mamma!" said Lady Harriet, the youngest daughter of the house — the prettiest, the most indulged; "I cannot go; there is the water-party up to Maidenhead on the 20th, I should be so sorry to miss it: and Mrs. Duncan's ball, and Grisi's concert; please, don't want me. Besides, I should do no good. I can't make provincial small-talk; I'm not up in the local

politics of Hollingford. I should be making mischief, I know I should."

"Very well, my dear," said Lady Cumnor, sighing, "I had forgotten the Maidenhead water-party, or I would not have asked you."

"What a pity it isn't the Eton holidays, so that you could have had Hollingford's boys to help you to do the honours, mamma. They are such affable little prigs. It was the greatest fun to watch them last year at Sir Edward's, doing the honours of their grandfather's house to much such a collection of humble admirers as you get together at the Towers. I shall never forget seeing Edgar gravely squiring about an old lady in a portentous black bonnet, and giving her information in the correctest grammar possible."

"Well, I like those lads," said Lady Cuxhaven; "they are on the way to become true gentlemen. But, mamma, why shouldn't you have Clare to stay with you? You like her, and she is just the person to save you the troubles of hospitality to the Hollingford people, and we should all be so much more comfortable if we knew you had her with you."

"Yes, Clare would do very well," said Lady Cumnor; "but isn't it her school-time or something? We must not interfere with her school so as to injure her, for I am afraid she is not doing too well as it is; and she has been so very unlucky ever since she left us — first her husband died, and then she lost Lady Davies' situation, and then Mrs. Maude's, and now Mr. Preston told your father it was all she could do to pay her way in Ashcombe, though Lord Cumnor lets her have the house rent-free."

"I can't think how it is," said Lady Harriet. "She's not very wise, certainly; but she is so useful and agreeable, and has such pleasant manners. I should have thought any one who wasn't particular about education would have been charmed to keep her as a governess."

"What do you mean by not being particular about education? Most people who keep governesses for their children are supposed to be particular," said Lady Cuxhaven.

"Well, they think themselves so, I've no doubt; but I call you particular, Mary, and I don't think mamma was; but she thought herself so, I am sure."

"I can't think what you mean, Harriet," said Lady Cumnor, a good deal annoyed at this speech of her clever, heedless, youngest daughter.

"Oh dear, mamma, you did everything you could think of for us; but you see you'd ever so many other engrossing interests, and Mary hardly allows her love for her husband to interfere with her all-absorbing care for the children. You gave us the best of masters in every department, and Clare to dragonize and keep us up to our preparation for them, as well as ever she could; but then you know, or rather you didn't know, some of the masters admired our very pretty governess, and there was a kind of respectable veiled flirtation going on, which never came to anything, to be sure; and then you were often so overwhelmed with your business as a great lady — fashionable and benevolent, and all that sort of thing — that you used to call Clare away from us at the most critical times of our lessons, to write your notes, or add up your accounts. and the consequence is, that I'm about the most i

informed girl in London. Only Mary was so capitally trained by good awkward Miss Benson, that she is always full to overflowing with accurate knowledge, and her glory is reflected upon me."

"Do you think what Harriet says is true, Mary?" asked Lady Cumnor, rather anxiously.

"I was so little with Clare in the school-room. I used to read French with her; she had a beautiful accent, I remember. Both Agnes and Harriet were very fond of her. I used to be jealous for Miss Benson's sake, and perhaps —" Lady Cuxhaven paused a minute — "that made me fancy that she had a way of flattering and indulging them — not quite conscientious, I used to think. But girls are severe judges, and certainly she had had an anxious enough lifetime. I am always so glad when we can have her, and give her a little pleasure. The only thing that makes me uneasy now is the way in which she seems to send her daughter away from her so much; we never can persuade her to bring Cynthia with her when she comes to see us."

"Now that I call ill-natured," said Lady Harriet; "here is a poor dear woman trying to earn her livelihood, first as a governess, and what could she do with her daughter then, but send her to school? and after that, when Clare is asked to go visiting, and is too modest to bring her girl with her — besides all the expense of the journey, and the rigging out — Mary finds fault with her for her modesty and economy."

"Well, after all, we are not discussing Clare and her affairs, but trying to plan for mamma's comfort. I don't see that she can do better than ask Mrs. Kirk-

patrick to come to the Towers — as soon as her holidays begin, I mean."

"Here is her last letter," said Lady Cumnor, who had been searching for it in her escritoire, while her daughters were talking. Holding her glasses before her eyes, she began to read, "'My wonted misfortunes appear to have followed me to Ashcombe' — um, um, um; that's not it — 'Mr. Preston is most kind in sending me fruit and flowers from the Manor-house, according to dear Lord Cumnor's kind injunction.' Oh, here it is! 'The vacation begins on the 11th, according to the usual custom of schools in Ashcombe; and I must then try and obtain some change of air and scene, in order to fit myself for the resumption of my duties on the 10th of August.' You see, girls, she would be at liberty, if she has not made any other arrangement for spending her holidays. To-day is the 15th."

"I'll write to her at once, mamma," Lady Harriet said. "Clare and I are always great friends; I was her confidant in her loves with poor Mr. Kirkpatrick, and we've kept up our intimacy ever since. I know of three offers she had besides."

"I sincerely hope Miss Bowes is not telling her love-affairs to Grace or Lily. Why, Harriet, you could not have been older than Grace when Clare was married!" said Lady Cuxhaven, in maternal alarm.

"No; but I was well versed in the tender passion, thanks to novels. Now I daresay you don't admit novels into your school-room, Mary; so your daughters wouldn't be able to administer discreet sympathy to their governess in case she was the heroine of a love-affair."

"My dear Harriet, don't let me hear you talking of love in that way; it is not pretty. Love is a serious thing."

"My dear mamma, your exhortations are just eighteen years too late. I've talked all the freshness off love, and that's the reason I'm tired of the subject."

This last speech referred to a recent refusal of Lady Harriet's, which had displeased Lady Cumnor, and rather annoyed my lord; as they, the parents, could see no objection to the gentleman in question. Lady Cuxhaven did not want to have the subject brought up, so she hastened to say, —

"Do ask the poor little daughter to come with her mother to the Towers; why, she must be seventeen or more; she would really be a companion to you, mamma, if her mother was unable to come," said Lady Cuxhaven.

"I was not ten when Clare married, and I'm nearly nine-and-twenty," added Lady Harriet.

"Don't speak of it, Harriet; at any rate you are but eight-and-twenty now, and you look a great deal younger. There is no need to be always bringing up your age on every possible occasion."

"There was need of it now, though. I wanted to make out how old Cynthia Kirkpatrick was. I think she can't be far from eighteen."

"She is at school at Boulogne, I know; and so I don't think she can be as old as that. Clare says something about her in this letter: 'Under these circumstances' (the ill-success of her school), 'I cannot think myself justified in allowing myself the pleasure of having darling Cynthia at home for the holidays; especially as the period when the vacation in French

schools commences differs from that common in England; and it might occasion some confusion in my arrangements if darling Cynthia were to come to Ashcombe, and occupy my time and thoughts so immediately before the commencement of my scholastic duties as the 8th of August, on which day her vacation begins, which is but two days before my holidays end.' So, you see, Clare would be quite at liberty to come to me, and I daresay it would be a very nice change for her."

"And Hollingford is busy seeing after his new laboratory at the Towers, and is constantly backwards and forwards. And Agnes wants to go there for change of air, as soon as she is strong enough after her confinement. And even my own dear insatiable 'me' will have had enough of gaiety in two or three weeks, if this hot weather lasts."

"I think I may be able to come down for a few days too, if you will let me, mamma; and I'll bring Grace, who is looking rather pale and weedy; growing too fast, I am afraid. So I hope you won't be dull."

"My dear," said Lady Cumnor, drawing herself up, "I should be ashamed of feeling dull with my resources; my duties to others and to myself!"

So the plan in its present shape was told to Lord Cumnor, who highly approved of it; as he always did of every project of his wife's. Lady Cumnor's character was perhaps a little too ponderous for him in reality, but he was always full of admiration for all her words and deeds, and used to boast of her wisdom, her benevolence, her power and dignity, in her absence, as if by this means he could buttress up his own more feeble nature.

"Very good — very good, indeed! Clare to join you at the Towers! Capital! I could not have planned it better myself! I shall go down with you on Wednesday in time for the jollification on Thursday. I always enjoy that day; they are such nice, friendly people, those good Hollingford ladies. Then I'll have a day with Sheepshanks, and perhaps I may ride over to Ashcombe and see Preston — Brown Jess can do it in a day, eighteen miles — to be sure! But there's back again to the Towers! — how much is twice eighteen — thirty?"

"Thirty-six," said Lady Cumnor, sharply.

"So it is; you're always right, my dear. Preston's a clever, sharp fellow."

"I don't like him," said my lady.

"He takes looking after; but he's a sharp fellow. He's such a good-looking man, too, I wonder you don't like him."

"I never think whether a land-agent is handsome or not. They don't belong to the class of people whose appearance I notice."

"To be sure not. But he is a handsome fellow; and what should make you like him is the interest he takes in Clare and her prospects. He's constantly suggesting something that can be done to her house, and I know he sends her fruit, and flowers, and game just as regularly as we should ourselves if we lived at Ashcombe."

"How old is he?" said Lady Cumnor, with a faint suspicion of motives in her mind.

"About twenty-seven, I think. Ah! I see what is in your ladyship's head. No! no! he's too young for that. You must look out for some middle-aged

man, if you want to get poor Clare married; Preston won't do."

"I'm not a match-maker, as you might know. I never did it for my own daughters. I'm not likely to do it for Clare," said she, leaning back languidly.

"Well! you might do a worse thing. I'm beginning to think she'll never get on as a schoolmistress, though why she shouldn't, I'm sure I don't know; for she's an uncommonly pretty woman for her age, and her having lived in our family, and your having had her so often with you, ought to go a good way. I say, my lady, what do you think of Gibson? He would be just the right age — widower — lives near the Towers?"

"I told you just now I was no match-maker, my lord. I suppose we had better go by the old road — the people at those inns know us?"

And so they passed on to speaking about other things than Mrs. Kirkpatrick and her prospects, scholastic or matrimonial.

CHAPTER IX.

The Widower and the Widow.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick was only too happy to accept Lady Cumnor's invitation. It was what she had been hoping for, but hardly daring to expect, as she believed that the family were settled in London for some time to come. The Towers was a pleasant and luxurious house in which to pass her holidays; and though she was not one to make deep plans, or to look far ahead, she was quite aware of the prestige which her being able to say she had been staying with "dear Lady Cumnor" at the Towers, was likely to give her and her school in the eyes of a good many people; so she gladly prepared to join her ladyship on the 17th. Her wardrobe did not require much arrangement; if it had done, the poor lady would not have had much money to appropriate to the purpose. She was very pretty and graceful; and that goes a great way toward carrying off shabby clothes; and it was her taste more than any depth of feeling, that had made her persevere in wearing all the delicate tints — the violets and grays — which, with a certain admixture of black, constitute half-mourning. This style of becoming dress she was supposed to wear in memory of Mr. Kirkpatrick; in reality because it was both lady-like and economical. Her beautiful hair was of that rich auburn that hardly ever turns gray; and partly out of consciousness of its beauty, and partly because the washing of caps is expensive, she did not wear anything on her head; her

complexion had the vivid tints that often accompany the kind of hair which has once been red; and the only injury her skin had received from advancing years was that the colouring was rather more brilliant than delicate, and varied less with every passing emotion. She could no longer blush; and at eighteen she had been very proud of her blushes. Her eyes were soft, large, and china-blue in colour; they had not much expression or shadow about them, which was perhaps owing to the flaxen colour of her eyelashes. Her figure was a little fuller than it used to be, but her movements were as soft and sinuous as ever. Altogether, she looked much younger than her age, which was not far short of forty. She had a very pleasant voice, and read aloud well and distinctly, which Lady Cumnor liked. Indeed, for some inexplicable reasons, she was a greater, more positive favourite with Lady Cumnor than with any of the rest of the family, though they all liked her up to a certain point, and found it agreeably useful to have any one in the house who was so well acquainted with their ways and habits; so ready to talk, when a little trickle of conversation was required; so willing to listen, and to listen with tolerable intelligence, if the subjects spoken about did not refer to serious solid literature, or science, or politics, or social economy. About novels and poetry, travels and gossip, personal details, or anecdotes of any kind, she always made exactly the remarks which are expected from an agreeable listener; and she had sense enough to confine herself to those short expressions of wonder, admiration, and astonishment, which may mean anything, when more recondite things were talked about.

It was a very pleasant change to a poor unsuccessful schoolmistress to leave her own house, full of battered and shabby furniture (she had taken the goodwill and furniture of her predecessor at a valuation, two or three years before), where the look-out was as gloomy, and the surrounding as squalid, as is often the case in the smaller streets of a country town, and to come bowling through the Towers Park in the luxurious carriage sent to meet her; to alight, and feel secure that the well-trained servants would see after her bags and umbrella, and parasol, and cloak, without her loading herself with all these portable articles, as she had had to do while following the wheel-barrow containing her luggage in going to the Ashcombe coach-office that morning; to pass up the deep-piled carpets of the broad shallow stairs into my lady's own room, cool and deliciously fresh, even on this sultry day, and fragrant with great bowls of freshly gathered roses of every shade of colour. There were two or three new novels lying uncut on the table; the daily papers, the magazines. Every chair was an easy-chair of some kind or other; and all covered with French chintz that mimicked the real flowers in the garden below. She was familiar with the bedroom called hers, to which she was soon ushered by Lady Cumnor's maid. It seemed to her far more like home than the dingy place she had left that morning; it was so natural to her to like dainty draperies, and harmonious colouring, and fine linen, and soft raiment. She sate down in the arm-chair by the bed-side, and wondered over her fate something in this fashion —

"One would think it was an easy enough thing to deck a looking-glass like that with muslin and pink

ribbons; and yet how hard it is to keep it up! People don't know how hard it is till they've tried as I have. I made my own glass just as pretty when I first went to Ashcombe; but the muslin got dirty, and the pink ribbons faded, and it is so difficult to earn money to renew them; and when one has got the money one hasn't the heart to spend it all at once. One thinks and one thinks how one can get the most good out of it; and a new gown, or a day's pleasure, or some hot-house fruit, or some piece of elegance that can be seen and noticed in one's drawing-room, carries the day, and good-by to prettily decked looking-glasses. Now here, money is like the air they breathe. No one even asks or knows how much the washing costs, or what pink ribbon is a yard. Ah! it would be different if they had to earn every penny as I have! They would have to calculate, like me, how to get the most pleasure out of it. I wonder if I am to go on all my life toiling and moiling for money? It's not natural. Marriage is the natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do, and his wife sits in the drawing-room like a lady. I did, when poor Kirkpatrick was alive. Heigho! it's a sad thing to be a widow."

Then there was the contrast between the dinners which she had to share with her scholars at Ashcombe — rounds of beef, legs of mutton, great dishes of potatoes, and large batter-puddings, with the tiny meal of exquisitely cooked delicacies, sent up on old Chelsea china, that was served every day to the earl and countess and herself at the Towers. She dreaded the end of her holidays as much as the most home-loving of her pupils. But at this time that end was some weeks off, so Clare shut her eyes to the future, and tried to

relish the present to its fullest extent. A disturbance to the pleasant, even course of the summer days came in the indisposition of Lady Cumnor. Her husband had gone back to London, and she and Mrs. Kirkpatrick had been left to the very even tenor of life, which was according to my lady's wish just now. In spite of her languor and fatigue, she had gone through the day when the school visitors came to the Towers, in full dignity, dictating clearly all that was to be done, what walks were to be taken, what hothouses to be seen, and when the party were to return to the "collation." She herself remained indoors, with one or two ladies who had ventured to think that the fatigue or the heat might be too much for them, and who had therefore declined accompanying the ladies in charge of Mrs. Kirkpatrick, or those other favoured few to whom Lord Cumnor was explaining the new buildings in his farm-yard. "With the utmost condescension," as her hearers afterwards expressed it, Lady Cumnor told them all about her married daughters' establishments, nurseries, plans for the education of their children, and manner of passing the day. But the exertion tired her; and when every one had left, the probability is that she would have gone to lie down and rest, had not her husband made an unlucky remark in the kindness of his heart. He came up to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm afraid you're sadly tired, my lady?" he said.

She braced her muscles, and drew herself up, saying coldly, —

"When I am tired, Lord Cumnor, I will tell you so." And her fatigue showed itself during the rest of the evening in her sitting particularly upright, and

declining all offers of easy-chairs or foot-stools, and refusing the insult of a suggestion that they should all go to bed earlier. She went on in something of this kind of manner as long as Lord Cumnor remained at the Towers. Mrs. Kirkpatrick was quite deceived by it, and kept assuring Lord Cumnor that she had never seen dear Lady Cumnor looking better, or so strong. But he had an affectionate heart, if a blundering head; and though he could give no reason for his belief, he was almost certain his wife was not well. Yet he was too much afraid of her to send for Mr. Gibson without her permission. His last words to Clare were —

"It's such a comfort to leave my lady to you; only don't you be deluded by her ways. She'll not show she's ill till she can't help it. Consult with Bradley" (Lady Cumnor's "own woman," — she disliked the new-fangledness of "lady's-maid"); "and if I were you, I'd send and ask Gibson to call — you might make any kind of a pretence," — and then the idea he had had in London of the fitness of a match between the two coming into his head just now, he could not help adding, — "Get him to come and see you, he's a very agreeable man; Lord Hollingford says there's no one like him in these parts: and he might be looking at my lady while he was talking to you, and see if he thinks her really ill. And let me know what he says about her."

But Clare was just as great a coward about doing anything for Lady Cumnor which she had not expressly ordered, as Lord Cumnor himself. She knew she might fall into such disgrace if she sent for Mr. Gibson without direct permission, that she might never be asked to stay at the Towers again; and the life

there, monotonous in its smoothness of luxury as it might be to some, was exactly to her taste. She in her turn tried to put upon Bradley the duty which Lord Cumnor had put upon her.

"Mrs. Bradley," she said one day, "are you quite comfortable about my lady's health? Lord Cumnor fancied that she was looking worn and ill?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, I don't think my lady is herself. I can't persuade myself as she is, though if you was to question me till night I couldn't tell you why."

"Don't you think you could make some errand to Hollingford, and see Mr. Gibson, and ask him to come round this way some day, and make a call on Lady Cumnor?"

"It would be as much as my place is worth, Mrs. Kirkpatrick. Till my lady's dying day, if Providence keeps her in her senses, she'll have everything done her own way, or not at all. There's only Lady Harriet that can manage her the least, and she not always."

"Well, then — we must hope that there is nothing the matter with her; and I daresay there is not. She says there is not, and she ought to know best herself."

But a day or two after this conversation took place, Lady Cumnor startled Mrs. Kirkpatrick, by saying suddenly, —

"Clare, I wish you'd write a note to Mr. Gibson, saying I should like to see him this afternoon. I thought he would have called of himself before now. He ought to have done so, to pay his respects."

Mr. Gibson had been far too busy in his profession to have time for mere visits of ceremony, though he

knew quite well he was neglecting what was expected of him. But the district of which he may be said to have had medical charge was full of a bad kind of low fever, which took up all his time and thought, and often made him very thankful that Molly was out of the way in the quiet shades of Hamley.

His domestic "rows" had not healed over in the least, though he was obliged to put the perplexities on one side for the time. The last drop — the final straw, had been an impromptu visit of Lord Hollingford's, whom he had met in the town one forenoon. They had had a good deal to say to each other about some new scientific discovery, with the details of which Lord Hollingford was well acquainted, while Mr. Gibson was ignorant and deeply interested. At length Lord Hollingford said suddenly, —

"Gibson, I wonder if you'd give me some lunch; I've been a good deal about since my seven-o'clock breakfast, and am getting quite ravenous."

Now Mr. Gibson was only too much pleased to show hospitality to one whom he liked and respected so much as Lord Hollingford, and he gladly took him home with him to the early family dinner. But it was just at the time when the cook was sulking at Bethia's dismissal — and she chose to be unpunctual and careless. There was no successor to Bethia as yet appointed to wait at the meals. So, though Mr. Gibson knew well that bread-and-cheese, cold beef, or the simplest food available, would have been welcome to the hungry lord, he could not get either these things for luncheon, or even the family dinner, at anything like the proper time, in spite of all his ringing, and as much anger as he liked to show, for fear of making

Lord Hollingford uncomfortable. At last dinner was ready, but the poor host saw the want of nicety — almost the want of cleanliness, in all its accompaniments — dingy plate, dull-looking glass, a table-cloth that, if not absolutely dirty, was anything but fresh in its splashed and rumpled condition, and compared it in his own mind with the dainty delicacy with which even a loaf of brown bread was served up at his guest's home. He did not apologize directly, but, after dinner, just as they were parting, he said, —

"You see a man like me — a widower — with a daughter who cannot always be at home — has not a regulated household which would enable me to command the small portions of time I can spend there."

He made no allusion to the comfortless meal of which they had both partaken, though it was full in his mind. Nor was it absent from Lord Hollingford's as he made reply, —

"True, true. Yet a man like you ought to be free from any thought of household cares. You ought to have somebody. How old is Miss Gibson?"

"Seventeen. It's a very awkward age for a motherless girl."

"Yes; very. I have only boys, but it must be very awkward with a girl. Excuse me, Gibson, but we're talking like friends. Have you never thought of marrying again? It would not be like a first marriage, of course; but if you found a sensible agreeable woman of thirty or so, I really think you couldn't do better than take her to manage your home, and so save you either discomfort or wrong; and, beside, she would be able to give your daughter that kind of tender supervision which, I fancy, all girls of that age re-

quire. It's a delicate subject, but you'll excuse my having spoken frankly."

Mr. Gibson had thought of this advice several times since it was given; but it was a case of "first catch your hare." Where was the "sensible and agreeable woman of thirty or so?" Not Miss Browning, nor Miss Phœbe, nor Miss Goodenough. Among his country patients there were two classes pretty distinctly marked: farmers, whose children were unrefined and uneducated; squires, whose daughters would, indeed, think the world was coming to a pretty pass, if they were to marry a country surgeon.

But the first day on which Mr. Gibson paid his visit to Lady Cumnor, he began to think it possible that Mrs. Kirkpatrick was his "hare." He rode away with slack rein, thinking over what he knew of her, more than about the prescriptions he should write, or the way he was going. He remembered her as a very pretty Miss Clare: the governess who had the scarlet fever; that was in his wife's days, a long time ago; he could hardly understand Mrs. Kirkpatrick's youthfulness of appearance when he thought how long. Then he had heard of her marriage to a curate; and the next day (or so it seemed, he could not recollect the exact duration of the interval), of his death. He knew, in some way, that ever since she had been living as a governess in different families; but that she had always been a great favourite with the family at the Towers, for whom, quite independent of their rank, he had a true respect. A year or two ago he had heard that she had taken the good-will of a school at Ashcombe; a small town close to another property of Lord Cumnor's, in the same county. Ashcombe was a larger

estate than that near Hollingford, but the old Manor-house there was not nearly so good a residence as the Towers; so it was given up to Mr. Preston, the land-agent, for the Ashcombe property, just as Mr. Sheepshanks was for that at Hollingford. There were a few rooms at the Manor-house reserved for the occasional visits of the family, otherwise Mr. Preston, a handsome young bachelor, had it all to himself. Mr. Gibson knew that Mrs. Kirkpatrick had one child, a daughter, who must be much about the same age as Molly. Of course she had very little, if any, property. But he himself had lived carefully, and had a few thousands well invested; besides which, his professional income was good, and increasing rather than diminishing every year. By the time he had arrived at this point in his consideration of the case, he was at the house of the next patient on his round, and he put away all thought of matrimony and Mrs. Kirkpatrick for the time. Once again, in the course of the day, he remembered with a certain pleasure that Molly had told him some little details connected with her unlucky detention at the Towers five or six years ago, which had made him feel at the time as if Mrs. Kirkpatrick had behaved very kindly to his little girl. So there the matter rested for the present, as far as he was concerned.

Lady Cumnor was out of health; but not so ill as she had been fancying herself during all those days when the people about her dared not send for the doctor. It was a great relief to her to have Mr. Gibson to decide for her what she was to do; what to eat, drink, avoid. Such decisions *ab extra*, are sometimes a wonderful relief to those whose habit it has been to

decide, not only for themselves, but for every one else; and occasionally the relaxation of the strain which a character for infallible wisdom brings with it, does much to restore health. Mrs. Kirkpatrick thought in her secret soul that she had never found it so easy to get on with Lady Cumnor; and Bradley and she had never done singing the praises of Mr. Gibson, "who always managed my lady so beautifully."

Reports were duly sent up to my lord, but he and his daughters were strictly forbidden to come down. Lady Cumnor wished to be weak and languid, and uncertain both in body and mind, without the family observation. It was a condition so different to anything she had ever been in before, that she was unconsciously afraid of losing her prestige, if she was seen in it. Sometimes she herself wrote the daily bulletins; at other times she bade Clare do it, but she would always see the letters. Any answers she received from her daughters she used to read herself, occasionally imparting some of their contents to "that good Clare." But anybody might read my lord's letters. There was no great fear of family secrets oozing out in his sprawling lines of affection. But once Mrs. Kirkpatrick came upon a sentence in a letter from Lord Cumnor, which she was reading out loud to his wife, that caught her eye before she came to it, and if she could have skipped it and kept it for private perusal, she would gladly have done so. My lady was too sharp for her, though. In her opinion "Clare was a good creature, but not clever," the truth being that she was not always quick at resources, though tolerably unscrupulous in the use of them.

"Read on. What are you stopping for? There is

no bad news, is there, about Agnes? — Give me the letter."

Lady Cumnor read, half aloud, —

"How are Clare and Gibson getting on? You despised my advice to help on that affair, but I really think a little match-making would be a very pleasant amusement now that you are shut up in the house; and I cannot conceive any marriage more suitable."

"Oh!" said Lady Cumnor, laughing, "it was awkward for you to come upon that, Clare: I don't wonder you stopped short. You gave me a terrible fright, though."

"Lord Cumnor is so fond of joking," said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a little flurried, yet quite recognizing the truth of his last words, — "I cannot conceive any marriage more suitable." She wondered what Lady Cumnor thought of it. Lord Cumnor wrote as if there was really a chance. It was not an unpleasant idea; it brought a faint smile out upon her face, as she sat by Lady Cumnor, while the latter took her afternoon nap.

CHAPTER X.

A Crisis.

MRS. KIRKPATRICK had been reading aloud till Lady Cumnor fell asleep, the book rested on her knee, just kept from falling by her hold. She was looking out of the window, not seeing the trees in the park, nor the glimpses of the hills beyond, but thinking how pleasant it would be to have a husband once more; — some one who would work while she sate at her elegant ease in a prettily-furnished drawing-room; and she was rapidly investing this imaginary bread-winner with the form and features of the country surgeon, when there was a slight tap at the door, and almost before she could rise, the object of her thoughts came in. She felt herself blush, and she was not displeased at the consciousness. She advanced to meet him, making a sign towards her sleeping ladyship.

"Very good," said he, in a low voice, casting a professional eye on the slumbering figure; "can I speak to you for a minute or two in the library?"

"Is he going to offer?" thought she, with a sudden palpitation, and a conviction of her willingness to accept a man whom an hour before she had simply looked upon as one of the category of unmarried men to whom matrimony was possible.

He was only going to make one or two medic inquiries; she found that out very speedily, and c sidered the conversation as rather flat to her, thou

it might be instructive to him. She was not aware that he finally made up his mind to propose, during the time that she was speaking — answering his questions in many words, but he was accustomed to winnow the chaff from the corn; and her voice was so soft, her accent so pleasant, that it struck him as particularly agreeable after the broad country accent he was perpetually hearing. Then the harmonious colours of her dress, and her slow and graceful movements, had something of the same soothing effect upon his nerves that a cat's purring has upon some people's. He began to think that he should be fortunate if he could win her, for his own sake. Yesterday he had looked upon her more as a possible stepmother for Molly; to-day he thought more of her as a wife for himself. The remembrance of Lord Cumnor's letter gave her a very becoming consciousness; she wished to attract, and hoped that she was succeeding. Still they only talked of the countess's state for some time: then a lucky shower came on. Mr. Gibson did not care a jot for rain, but just now it gave him an excuse for lingering.

"It's very stormy weather," said he.

"Yes, very. My daughter writes me word, that for two days last week the packet could not sail from Boulogne."

"Miss Kirkpatrick is at Boulogne, is she?"

"Yes, poor girl; she is at school there, trying to perfect herself in the French language. But, Mr. Gibson, you must not call her Miss Kirkpatrick. Cynthia remembers you with so much — affection, I may say. She was your little patient when she had the measles here four years ago, you know. Pray call

her Cynthia; she would be quite hurt at such a formal name as Miss Kirkpatrick from you."

"Cynthia seems to me such an out-of-the-way name, only fit for poetry, not for daily use."

"It is mine," said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, in a plaintive tone of reproach. "I was christened Hyacinth, and her poor father would have her called after me. I'm sorry you don't like it."

Mr. Gibson did not know what to say. He was not quite prepared to plunge into the directly personal style. While he was hesitating, she went on —

"Hyacinth Clare! Once upon a time I was quite proud of my pretty name; and other people thought it pretty, too."

"I've no doubt —" Mr. Gibson began; and then stopped.

"Perhaps I did wrong in yielding to his wish, to have her called by such a romantic name. It may excite prejudice against her in some people; and, poor child! she will have enough to struggle with. A young daughter is a great charge, Mr. Gibson, especially when there is only one parent to look after her."

"You are quite right," said he, recalled to the remembrance of Molly; "though I should have thought that a girl who is so fortunate as to have a mother could not feel the loss of her father so acutely as one who is motherless must suffer from her deprivation."

"You are thinking of your own daughter. It was careless of me to say what I did. Dear child! how well I remember her sweet little face as she lay sleeping on my bed. I suppose she is nearly grown-up now. She must be near my Cynthia's age. How should like to see her!"

"I hope you will. I should like you to see her. I should like you to love my poor little Molly, — to love her as your own —" He swallowed down something that rose in his throat, and was nearly choking him.

"Is he going to offer? *Is* he?" she wondered; and she began to tremble in the suspense before he next spoke.

"Could you love her as your daughter? Will you try? Will you give me the right of introducing you to her as her future mother; as my wife?"

There! he had done it — whether it was wise or foolish — he had done it; but he was aware that the question as to its wisdom came into his mind the instant that the words were said past recall.

She hid her face in her hands.

"Oh! Mr. Gibson," she said; and then, a little to his surprise, and a great deal to her own, she burst into hysterical tears: it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood.

"My dear — my dearest," said he, trying to soothe her with word and caress; but, just at the moment, uncertain what name he ought to use. After her sobbing had abated a little, she said herself, as if understanding his difficulty, —

"Call me Hyacinth — your own Hyacinth. I can't bear 'Clare,' it does so remind me of being a governess, and those days are all past now."

"Yes; but surely no one can have been more valued, more beloved than you have been in this family at least."

"Oh, yes! they have been very good. But still one has always had to remember one's position."

"We ought to tell Lady Cumnor," said he, thinking, perhaps, more of the various duties which lay before him in consequence of the step he had just taken, than of what his future bride was saying.

"You'll tell her, won't you?" said she looking up in his face with beseeching eyes. "I always like other people to tell her things, and then I can see how she takes them."

"Certainly! I will do whatever you wish. Shall we go and see if she is awake now?"

"No! I think not, I had better prepare her. You will come to-morrow, won't you? and you will tell her then."

"Yes; that will be best. I ought to tell Molly first. She has the right to know. I do hope you and she will love each other dearly."

"Oh, yes! I'm sure we shall. Then you'll come to-morrow and tell Lady Cumnor? And I'll prepare her."

"I don't see what preparation is necessary; but you know best, my dear. When can we arrange for you and Molly to meet?"

Just then a servant came in, and the pair started apart.

"Her ladyship is awake, and wishes to see Mr. Gibson."

They both followed the man upstairs; Mrs. Kirkpatrick trying hard to look as if nothing had happened, for she particularly wished "to prepare" Lady Cumnor; that is to say, to give her version of Mr. Gibson's extreme urgency, and her own coy unwillingness.

But Lady Cumnor had observant eyes in sickness as well as in health. She had gone to sleep with the recollection of the passage in her husband's letter full in her mind, and, perhaps, it gave a direction to her wakening ideas.

"I'm glad you're not gone, Mr. Gibson. I wanted to tell you —— What's the matter with you both? What have you been saying to Clare? I'm sure something has happened."

There was nothing for it, in Mr. Gibson's opinion, but to make a clean breast of it, and tell her ladyship all. He turned round, and took hold of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's hand, and said out straight, "I have been asking Mrs. Kirkpatrick to be my wife, and to be a mother to my child; and she has consented. I hardly know how to thank her enough in words."

"Umph! I don't see any objection. I daresay you'll be very happy. I'm very glad of it! Here! shake hands with me, both of you." Then laughing a little, she added, "It does not seem to me that any exertion has been required on my part."

Mr. Gibson looked perplexed at these words. Mrs. Kirkpatrick reddened.

"Did she not tell you? Oh, then, I must. It's too good a joke to be lost, especially as everything has ended so well. When Lord Cumnor's letter came this morning — this very morning, I gave it to Clare to read aloud to me, and I saw she suddenly came to a full stop, where no full stop could be, and I thought it was something about Agnes, so I took the letter and read — stay! I'll read the sentence to you. Where's the letter, Clare? Oh! don't trouble yourself, here it is. 'How are Clare and Gibson getting on? You de-

spised my advice to help on that affair, but I really think a little match-making would be a very pleasant amusement, now that you are shut up in the house; and I cannot conceive any marriage more suitable.' You see, you have my lord's full approbation. But I must write, and tell him you have managed your own affairs without any interference of mine. Now we'll just have a little medical talk, Mr. Gibson, and then you and Clare shall finish your tête-à-tête."

They were neither of them quite as desirous of further conversation together as they had been before the passage out of Lord Cumnor's letter had been read aloud. Mr. Gibson tried not to think about it, for he was aware that if he dwelt upon it, he might get to fancy all sorts of things, as to the conversation which had ended in his offer. But Lady Cumnor was imperious now, as always.

"Come, no nonsense. I always made my girls go and have tête-à-têtes with the men who were to be their husbands, whether they would or no: there's a great deal to be talked over before every marriage, and you two are certainly old enough to be above affectation. Go away with you."

So there was nothing for it but for them to return to the library; Mrs. Kirkpatrick pouting a little, and Mr. Gibson feeling more like his own cool, sarcastic self, by many degrees, than he had done when last in that room.

She began, half crying, —

"I cannot tell what poor Kirkpatrick would say if he knew what I have done. He did so dislike the notion of second marriages, poor fellow."

"Let us hope that he doesn't know, then; or

if he does, he is wiser — I mean, that he sees how second marriages may be most desirable and expedient in some cases."

Altogether, this second tête-à-tête, done to command, was not so satisfactory as the first; and Mr. Gibson was quite alive to the necessity of proceeding on his round to see his patients before very much time had elapsed.

"We shall shake down into uniformity before long, I've no doubt," said he to himself, as he rode away. "It's hardly to be expected that our thoughts should run in the same groove all at once. Nor should I like it," he added. "It would be very flat and stagnant to have only an echo of one's own opinions from one's wife. Heigho! I must tell Molly about it: dear little woman, I wonder how she'll take it? It's done, in a great measure, for her good." And then he lost himself in recapitulating Mrs. Kirkpatrick's good qualities, and the advantages to be gained to his daughter from the step he had just taken.

It was too late to go round by Hamley that afternoon. The Towers and the Towers' round lay just in the opposite direction to Hamley. So it was the next morning before Mr. Gibson arrived at the hall, timing his visit as well as he could so as to have half-an-hour's private talk with Molly before Mrs. Hamley came down into the drawing-room. He thought that his daughter would require sympathy after receiving the intelligence he had to communicate; and he knew there was no one more fit to give it than Mrs. Hamley.

It was a brilliantly hot summer's morning; men in their shirt-sleeves were in the fields getting in the early harvest of oats; as Mr. Gibson rode slowly along, he could see them over the tall hedge-rows, and even hear

the soothing measured sound of the fall of the long swathes, as they were mown. The labourers seemed too hot to talk; the dog, guarding their coats and cans, lay panting loudly on the other side of the elm, under which Mr. Gibson stopped for an instant to survey the scene, and gain a little delay before the interview that he wished was well over. In another minute he had snapped at himself for his weakness, and put spurs to his horse. He came up to the hall at a good sharp trot; it was earlier than the usual time of his visits, and no one was expecting him; all the stable-men were in the fields, but that signified little to Mr. Gibson; he walked his horse about for five minutes or so before taking him into the stable, and loosened his girths, examining him with perhaps unnecessary exactitude. He went into the house by a private door, and made his way into the drawing-room, half expecting, however, that Molly would be in the garden. She had been there, but it was too hot and dazzling now for her to remain out of doors, and she had come in by the open window of the drawing-room. Oppressed with the heat, she had fallen asleep in an easy-chair, her bonnet and open book upon her knee, one arm hanging listlessly down. She looked very soft, and young, and childlike; and a gush of love sprang into her father's heart as he gazed at her.

"Molly!" said he, gently, taking the little brown hand that was hanging down, and holding it in his own. "Molly!"

She opened her eyes, that for one moment had no recognition in them. Then the light came brilliantly into them and she sprang up, and threw her arms round his neck, exclaiming, —

"Oh, papa, my dear, dear papa! What made you come while I was asleep? I lose the pleasure of watching for you."

Mr. Gibson turned a little paler than he had been before. He still held her hand, and drew her to a seat by him on a sofa, without speaking. There was no need; she was chattering away.

"I was up so early! It is so charming to be out here in the fresh morning air. I think that made me sleepy. But isn't it a gloriously hot day? I wonder if the Italian skies they talk about can be bluer than that — that little bit you see just between the oaks — there!"

She pulled her hand away, and used both it and the other to turn her father's head, so that he should exactly see the very bit she meant. She was rather struck by his unusual silence.

"Have you heard from Miss Eyre, papa? How are they all? And this fever that is about? Do you know, papa, I don't think you are looking well? You want me at home to take care of you. How soon may I come home?"

"Don't I look well? That must be all your fancy, goosey. I feel uncommonly well; and I ought to look well, for — I have a piece of news for you, little woman." (He felt that he was doing his business very awkwardly, but he was determined to plunge on.) "Can you guess it?"

"How should I?" said she; but her tone was changed, and she was evidently uneasy, as with the presage of an instinct.

"Why, you see, my love," said he, again taking her hand, "that you are in a very awkward position

— a girl growing up in such a family as mine — young men — which was a piece of confounded stupidity on my part. And I am obliged to be away so much."

"But there is Miss Eyre," said she, sick with the strengthening indefinite presage of what was to come. "Dear Miss Eyre, I want nothing but her and you."

"Still there are times like the present when Miss Eyre cannot be with you; her home is not with us; she has other duties. I've been in great perplexity for some time; but at last I've taken a step which will, I hope, make us both happier."

"You're going to be married again," said she, helping him out, with a quiet dry voice, and gently drawing her hand out of his.

"Yes. To Mrs. Kirkpatrick — you remember her? They call her Clare at the Towers. You recollect how kind she was to you that day you were left there?"

She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation — whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast — should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone.

Mr. Gibson saw that her silence was unnatural, and half-guessed at the cause of it. But he knew that she must have time to reconcile herself to the idea, and still believed that it would be for her eventual happiness. He had, besides, the relief of feeling that the secret was told, the confidence made, which he had

been dreading for the last twenty-four hours. He went on recapitulating all the advantages of the marriage; he knew them off by heart now.

"She's a very suitable age for me. I don't know how old she is exactly, but she must be nearly forty. I shouldn't have wished to marry any one younger. She's highly respected by Lord and Lady Cumnor and their family, which is of itself a character. She has very agreeable and polished manners — of course, from the circles she has been thrown into — and you and I, goosey, are apt to be a little brusque, or so; we must brush up our manners now."

No remark from her on this little bit of playfulness. He went on, —

"She has been accustomed to housekeeping — economical housekeeping, too — for of late years she has had a school at Ashcombe, and has had, of course, to arrange all things for a large family. And last, but not least, she has a daughter — about your age, Molly — who, of course, will come and live with us, and be a nice companion — a sister — for you."

Still she was silent. At length she said, —

"So I was sent out of the house that all this might be quietly arranged in my absence?"

Out of the bitterness of her heart she spoke, but she was roused out of her assumed impassiveness by the effect produced. Her father started up, and quickly left the room, saying something to himself — what, she could not hear, though she ran after him, followed him through dark stone passages, into the glare of the stable-yard, into the stables —

"Oh, papa, papa — I'm not myself — I don't know what to say about this hateful — detestable —"

He led his horse out. She did not know if he heard her word. Just as he mounted, he turned round upon her with a grey grim face —

"I think it's better for both of us, for me to go away now. We may say things difficult to forget. We are both much agitated. By to-morrow we shall be more composed; you will have thought it over, and seen that the principal — one great motive. I mean — was your good. You may tell Mrs. Hamley — I meant to have told her myself. I will come again to-morrow. Good-by, Molly."

For many minutes after he had ridden away — long after the sound of his horse's hoofs on the round stones of the paved lane, beyond the home-meadows, had died away — Molly stood there, shading her eyes, and looking at the empty space of air in which his form had last appeared. Her very breath seemed suspended; only, two or three times, after long intervals, she drew a miserable sigh, which was caught up into a sob. She turned away at last, but could not go into the house, could not tell Mrs. Hamley, could not forget how her father had looked and spoken — and left her.

She went out through a side-door — it was the way by which the gardeners passed when they took the manure into the garden — and the walk to which it led was concealed from sight as much as possible by shrubs and evergreens and over-arching trees. No one would know what became of her — and, with the ingratitude of misery, she added to herself, no one would care. Mrs. Hamley had her own husband, her own children, her close home interests — she was very good and kind, but there was a bitter grief in Molly's heart, with which the stranger could not intermeddle. She

went quickly on to the bourne which she had fixed for herself — a seat almost surrounded by the drooping leaves of a weeping-ash — a seat on the long broad terrace walk on the other side of the wood, that overlooked the pleasant slope of the meadows beyond. The walk had probably been made to command this sunny, peaceful landscape, with trees, and a church spire, two or three red-tiled roofs of old cottages, and a purple bit of rising ground in the distance; and at some previous date, when there might have been a large family of Hamleys residing at the Hall, ladies in hoops, and gentlemen in bag-wigs with swords by their sides, might have filled up the breadth of the terrace, as they sauntered, smiling, along. But no one ever cared to saunter there now. It was a deserted walk. The squire or his sons might cross it in passing to a little gate that led to the meadow beyond; but no one loitered there. Molly almost thought that no one knew of the hidden seat under the ash-tree but herself; for there were not more gardeners employed upon the grounds than were necessary to keep the kitchen-gardens and such of the ornamental part as was frequented by the family, or in sight of the house, in good order.

When she had once got to the seat she broke out with suppressed passion of grief. She did not care to analyze the sources of her tears and sobs — her father was going to be married again — her father was angry with her; she had done very wrong — he had gone away displeased; she had lost his love; he was going to be married — away from her — away from his child — his little daughter — forgetting her own dear, dear mother. So she thought in a tumultuous kind of way, sobbing till she was wearied out, and had to gain

strength by being quiet for a time, to break forth into her passion of tears afresh. She had cast herself on the ground — that natural throne for violent sorrow — and leant up against the old moss-grown seat; sometimes burying her face in her hands; sometimes clasping them together, as if by the tight painful grasp of her fingers she could deaden mental suffering.

She did not see Roger Hamley returning from the meadows, nor hear the click of the little white gate. He had been out dredging in ponds and ditches, and had his wet sling-net, with its imprisoned treasures of nastiness, over his shoulder. He was coming home to lunch, having always a fine midday appetite, though he pretended to despise the meal in theory. But he knew that his mother liked his companionship then; she depended much upon her luncheon, and was seldom downstairs and visible to her family much before the time. So he overcame his theory, for the sake of his mother, and had his reward in the hearty relish with which he kept her company in eating.

He did not see Molly as he crossed the terrace-walk on his way homewards. He had gone about twenty yards along the small wood-path at right angles to the terrace, when, looking among the grass and wild plants under the trees, he spied out one which was rare, one which he had been long wishing to find in flower, and saw it at last, with those bright keen eyes of his. Down went his net, skilfully twisted so as to retain its contents, while it lay amid the herbage, and he himself went with light and well-planted footsteps in search of the treasure. He was so great a lover of nature that, without any thought, but habitually, he always avoided treading unnecessarily on any plant; who knew what

long-sought growth or insect might develop itself in that which now appeared but insignificant?

His steps led him in the direction of the ash-tree seat, much less screened from observation on this side than on the terrace. He stopped; he saw a light-coloured dress on the ground — somebody half-lying on the seat, so still just then, he wondered if the person, whoever it was, had fallen ill or fainted. He paused to watch. In a minute or two the sobs broke out again — the words. It was Miss Gibson crying in a broken voice, —

"Oh, papa, papa! if you would but come back!"

For a minute or two he thought it would be kinder to leave her fancying herself unobserved; he had even made a retrograde step or two, on tip-toe; but then he heard the miserable sobbing again. It was farther than his mother could walk, or else, be the sorrow what it would, she was the natural comforter of this girl, her visitor. However, whether it was right or wrong, delicate or obtrusive, when he heard the sad voice talking again, in such tones of uncomforted, lonely misery, he turned back, and went to the green tent under the ash-tree. She started up when he came thus close to her; she tried to check her sobs, and instinctively smoothed her wet tangled hair back with her hands.

He looked down upon her with grave, kind sympathy, but he did not know exactly what to say.

"Is it lunch-time?" said she, trying to believe that he did not see the traces of her tears and the disturbance of her features — that he had not seen her lying, sobbing her heart out there.

"I don't know. I was going home to lunch. But — you must let me say it — I couldn't go on when I saw your distress. Has anything happened? — anything

in which I can help you, I mean; for, of course, I've no right to make the inquiry, if it is any private sorrow, in which I can be of no use."

She had exhausted herself so much with crying, that she felt as if she could neither stand nor walk just yet. She sate down on the seat, and sighed, and turned so pale, he thought she was going to faint.

"Wait a moment," said he, quite unnecessarily, for she could not have stirred; and he was off like a shot to some spring of water that he knew of in the wood, and in a minute or two he returned with careful steps, bringing a little in a broad green leaf, turned into an impromptu cup. Little as it was, it did her good.

"Thank you!" she said: "I can walk back now, in a short time. Don't stop."

"You must let me," said he: "my mother wouldn't like me to leave you to come home alone, while you are so faint."

So they remained in silence for a little while; he, breaking off and examining one or two abnormal leaves of the ash-tree, partly from the custom of his nature, partly to give her time to recover.

"Papa is going to be married again," said she, at length.

She could not have said why she told him this; an instant before she spoke, she had no intention of doing so. He dropped the leaf he held in his hand, turned round, and looked at her. Her poor wistful eyes were filling with tears as they met his, with a dumb appeal for sympathy. Her look was much more eloquent than her words. There was a momentary pause before he replied, and then it was more because he felt that h

must say something than that he was in any doubt as to the answer to the question he asked.

"You are sorry for it?"

She did not take her eyes away from his, as her quivering lips formed the word "Yes," though her voice made no sound. He was silent again now; looking on the ground, kicking softly at a loose pebble with his foot. His thoughts did not come readily to the surface in the shape of words; nor was he apt at giving comfort till he saw his way clear to the real source from which consolation must come. At last he spoke, — almost as if he was reasoning out the matter with himself.

"It seems as if there might be cases where — setting the question of love entirely on one side — it must be almost a duty to find some one to be a substitute for the mother . . . I can believe," said he, in a different tone of voice, and looking at Molly afresh, "that this step may be greatly for your father's happiness — it may relieve him from many cares, and may give him a pleasant companion."

"He had me. You don't know what we were to each other — at least, what he was to me," she added, humbly.

"Still he must have thought it for the best, or he wouldn't have done it. He may have thought it the best for your sake even more than for his own."

"That is what he tried to convince me of."

Roger began kicking the pebble again. He had not got hold of the right end of the clue. Suddenly he looked up.

"I want to tell you of a girl I know. Her mother died when she was about sixteen — the eldest of a large family. From that time — all through the bloom

of her youth — she gave herself up to her father, first as his comforter, afterwards as his companion, friend, secretary — anything you like. He was a man with a great deal of business on hand, and often came home only to set to afresh to preparations for the next day's work. Harriet was always there, ready to help, to talk, or to be silent. It went on for eight or ten years in this way; and then her father married again, — a woman not many years older than Harriet herself. Well — they are just the happiest set of people I know — you wouldn't have thought it likely, would you?"

She was listening, but she had no heart to say anything. Yet she was interested in this little story of Harriet — a girl who had been so much to her father, more than Molly in this early youth of hers could have been to Mr. Gibson. "How was it?" she sighed out at last.

"Harriet thought of her father's happiness before she thought of her own," Roger answered, with something of severe brevity. Molly needed the bracing. She began to cry again a little.

"If it were for papa's happiness——"

"He must believe that it is. Whatever you fancy, give him a chance. He cannot have much comfort, I should think, if he sees you fretting or pining, — you who have been so much to him, as you say. The lady herself, too — if Harriet's stepmother had been a selfish woman, and been always clutching after the gratification of her own wishes; but she was not: she was as anxious for Harriet to be happy as Harriet was for her father — and your father's future wife

may be another of the same kind, though such people are rare."

"I don't think she is, though," murmured Molly, a waft of recollection bringing to her mind the details of her day at the Towers long ago.

Roger did not want to hear Molly's reasons for this doubting speech. He felt as if he had no right to hear more of Mr. Gibson's family life, past, present, or to come, than was absolutely necessary for him, in order that he might comfort and help the crying girl, whom he had come upon so unexpectedly. And besides, he wanted to go home, and be with his mother at lunch-time. Yet he could not leave her alone.

"It is right to hope for the best about everybody, and not to expect the worst. This sounds like a truism, but it has comforted me before now, and some day you'll find it useful. One has always to try to think more of others than of oneself, and it is best not to prejudge people on the bad side. My sermons aren't long, are they? Have they given you an appetite for lunch? Sermons always make me hungry, I know."

He appeared to be waiting for her to get up and come along with him, as indeed he was. But he meant her to perceive that he should not leave her; so she rose up languidly, too languid to say how much she should prefer being left alone, if he would only go away without her. She was very weak, and stumbled over the straggling root of a tree that projected across the path. He, watchful though silent, saw this stumble, and putting out his hand held her up from falling. He still held her hand when the occasion was past; this little physical failure impressed on his heart how young and helpless she was, and he yearned to her, remember-

ing the passion of sorrow in which he had found her, and longing to be of some little tender bit of comfort to her, before they parted — before their tête-à-tête walk was merged in the general familiarity of the household life. Yet he did not know what to say.

"You will have thought me hard," he burst out at length, as they were nearing the drawing-room windows and the garden-door. "I never can manage to express what I feel — somehow I always fall to philosophizing — but I am sorry for you. Yes, I am; it's beyond my power to help you, as far as altering facts goes, but I can feel for you, in a way which it's best not to talk about, for it can do no good. Remember how sorry I am for you! I shall often be thinking of you, though I daresay it's best not to talk about it again."

She said, "I know you are sorry," under her breath, and then she broke away, and ran indoors, and upstairs to the solitude of her own room. He went straight to his mother, who was sitting before the untasted luncheon, as much annoyed by the mysterious unpunctuality of her visitor as she was capable of being with anything; for she had heard that Mr. Gibson had been, and was gone, and she could not discover if he had left any message for her; and her anxiety about her own health, which some people esteemed hypochondriacal, always made her particularly craving for the wisdom which might fall from her doctor's lips.

"Where have you been, Roger? Where is Molly?—Miss Gibson, I mean," for she was careful to keep up a barrier of forms between the young man and young woman who were thrown together in the same household.

"I've been out dredging. (By the way, I left my

net on the terrace walk.) I found Miss Gibson sitting there, crying as if her heart would break. Her father is going to be married again."

"Married again! You don't say so."

"Yes, he is; and she takes it very hardly, poor girl. Mother, I think if you could send some one to her with a glass of wine, a cup of tea, or something of that sort — she was very nearly fainting ——"

"I'll go to her myself, poor child," said Mrs. Hamley, rising.

"Indeed you must not," said he, laying his hand upon her arm. "We have kept you waiting already too long; you are looking quite pale. Hammond can take it," he continued, ringing the bell. She sate down again, almost stunned with surprise.

"Whom is he going to marry?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask, and she didn't tell me."

"That's so like a man. Why, half the character of the affair lies in the question of who it is that he is going to marry."

"I daresay I ought to have asked. But somehow I'm not a good one on such occasions. I was as sorry as could be for her, and yet I couldn't tell what to say."

"What did you say?"

"I gave her the best advice in my power."

"Advice! you ought to have comforted her. Poor little Molly!"

"I think that if advice is good it's the best comfort."

"That depends on what you mean by advice. Hush here she is."

To their surprise, Molly came in, trying hard to look as usual. She had bathed her eyes, and arranged her hair; and was making a great struggle to keep from crying, and to bring her voice into order. She was unwilling to distress Mrs. Hamley by the sight of pain and suffering. She did not know that she was following Roger's injunction to think more of others than of herself — but so she was. Mrs. Hamley was not sure if it was wise in her to begin on the piece of news she had just heard from her son; but she was too full of it herself to talk of anything else. "So I hear your father is going to be married, my dear? May I ask whom it is to?"

"Mrs. Kirkpatrick. I think she was governess a long time ago at the Countess of Cumnor's. She stays with them a great deal, and they call her Clare, and I believe they are very fond of her." Molly tried to speak of her future stepmother in the most favourable manner she knew how.

"I think I've heard of her. Then she is not very young? That's as it should be. A widow too. Has she any family?"

"One girl, I believe. But I know so little about her!"

Molly was very near crying again.

"Never mind, my dear. That will all come in good time. Roger, you've hardly eaten anything; where are you going?"

"To fetch my dredging-net. It's full of things I don't want to lose. Besides, I never eat much, as a general thing." The truth was partly told, not all. He thought he had better leave the other two alone His mother had such sweet power of sympathy, th

she would draw the sting out of the girl's heart in a tête-à-tête. As soon as he was gone, Molly lifted up her poor swelled eyes, and, looking at Mrs. Hamley, she said, — "He was so good to me. I mean to try and remember all he said."

"I'm glad to hear it, love; very glad. From what he told me, I was afraid he had been giving you a little lecture. He has a good heart, but he isn't so tender in his manner as Osborne. Roger is a little rough sometimes."

"Then I like roughness. It did me good. It made me feel how badly — oh, Mrs. Hamley, I did behave so badly to papa this morning."

She rose up and threw herself into Mrs. Hamley's arms, and sobbed upon her breast. Her sorrow was not now for the fact that her father was going to be married again, but for her own ill-behaviour.

If Roger was not tender in words, he was in deeds. Unreasonably and possibly exaggerated as Molly's grief had appeared to him, it was real suffering to her; and he took some pains to lighten it, in his own way, which was characteristic enough. That evening he adjusted his microscope, and put the treasures he had collected in his morning's ramble on a little table; and then he asked his mother to come and admire. Of course Molly came too, and this was what he had intended. He tried to interest her in his pursuit, cherished her first little morsel of curiosity, and nursed it into a very proper desire for further information. Then he brought out books on the subject, and translated the slightly pompous and technical language into homely every-day speech. Molly had come down to dinner, wondering how the long hours till bedtime would ever

pass away: hours during which she must not speak on the one thing that would be occupying her mind to the exclusion of all others; for she was afraid that already she had wearied Mrs. Hamley with it during their afternoon tête-à-tête. But prayers and bedtime came long before she expected; she had been refreshed by a new current of thought, and she was very thankful to Roger. And now there was to-morrow to come, and a confession of penitence to be made to her father.

But Mr. Gibson did not want speech or words. He was not fond of expressions of feeling at any time, and perhaps, too, he felt that the less said the better on a subject about which it was evident that his daughter and he were not thoroughly and impulsively in harmony. He read her repentance in her eyes; he saw how much she had suffered; and he had a sharp pang at his heart in consequence. And he stopped her from speaking out her regret at her behaviour the day before, by a "There, there, that will do. I know all you want to say. I know my little Molly — my silly little goosey — better than she knows herself. I've brought you an invitation. Lady Cumnor wants you to go and spend next Thursday at the Towers!"

"Do you wish me to go?" said she, her heart sinking.

"I wish you and Hyacinth to become better acquainted — to learn to love each other."

"Hyacinth!" said Molly, entirely bewildered.

"Yes; Hyacinth! It's the silliest name I ever heard of; but it's hers, and I must call her by it. I can't bear Clare, which is what my lady and all the family at the Towers call her; and 'Mrs. Kirkpatrick'

is formal and nonsensical too, as she'll change her name so soon."

"When, papa?" asked Molly, feeling as if she were living in a strange, unknown world.

"Not till after Michaelmas." And then, continuing on his own thoughts, he added, "And the worst is, she's gone and perpetuated her own affected name by having her daughter called after her. Cynthia! One thinks of the moon, and the man in the moon with his bundle of faggots. I'm thankful you're plain Molly, child."

"How old is she — Cynthia, I mean?"

"Ay, get accustomed to the name. I should think Cynthia Kirkpatrick was about as old as you are. She's at school in France, picking up airs and graces. She's to come home for the wedding, so you'll be able to get acquainted with her then; though, I think, she's to go back again for another half-year or so."

CHAPTER XI

Making Friendship.

Mr. Gibson believed that Cynthia Kirkpatrick was to return to England to be present at her mother's wedding; but Mrs. Kirkpatrick had no such intention. She was not what is commonly called a woman of determination; but somehow what she disliked she avoided; and what she liked she tried to do, or to have. So although in the conversation, which she had already led to, as to the when and the how she was to be married, she had listened quietly to Mr. Gibson's proposal that Molly and Cynthia should be the two bridesmaids, still she had felt how disagreeable it would be to her to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother; and as the further arrangements for the wedding became more definite, she saw further reasons in her own mind for Cynthia's remaining quietly at her school at Boulogne.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick had gone to bed that first night of her engagement to Mr. Gibson, fully anticipating a speedy marriage. She looked to it as a release from the thraldom of keeping school; keeping an unprofitable school, with barely pupils enough to pay for house-rent and taxes, food, washing, and the requisite masters. She saw no reason for ever going back to Ashcombe, except to wind up her affairs, and to pack up her clothes. She hoped that Mr. Gibson's ardour woul

such that he would press on the marriage, and urge her never to resume her school drudgery, but to relinquish it now and for ever. She even made up a very pretty, very passionate speech for him in her own mind; quite sufficiently strong to prevail upon her, and to overthrow the scruples which she felt she ought to have, at telling the parents of her pupils that she did not intend to resume school, and that they must find another place of education for their daughters, in the last week but one of the midsummer holidays.

It was rather like a douche of cold water on Mrs. Kirkpatrick's plans, when the next morning at breakfast Lady Cumnor began to decide upon the arrangements and duties of the two middle-aged lovers.

"Of course you can't give up your school all at once, Clare. The wedding can't be before Christmas, but that will do very well. We shall all be down at the Towers; and it will be a nice amusement for the children to go over to Ashcombe, and see you married."

"I think — I am afraid — I don't believe Mr. Gibson will like waiting so long; men are so impatient under these circumstances."

"Oh, nonsense! Lord Cumnor has recommended you to his tenants, and I'm sure he wouldn't like them to be put to any inconvenience. Mr. Gibson will see that in a moment. He's a man of sense, or else he wouldn't be our family doctor. Now, what are you going to do about your little girl? Have you fixed yet?"

"No. Yesterday there seemed so little time, and when one is agitated it is so difficult to think of anything. Cynthia is nearly eighteen, old enough to go

out as a governess, if he wishes it, but I don't think he will. He is so generous and kind."

"Well! I must give you time to settle some of your affairs to-day. Don't waste it in sentiment, you're too old for that. Come to a clear understanding with each other; it will be for your happiness in the long run."

So they did come to a clear understanding about one or two things. To Mrs. Kirkpatrick's dismay, she found that Mr. Gibson had no more idea than Lady Cumnor of her breaking faith with the parents of her pupils. Though he really was at a serious loss as to what was to become of Molly until she could be under the protection of his new wife at her own home, and though his domestic worries teased him more and more every day, he was too honourable to think of persuading Mrs. Kirkpatrick to give up school a week sooner than was right for his sake. He did not even perceive how easy the task of persuasion would be; with all her winning wiles she could scarcely lead him to feel impatience for the wedding to take place at Michaelmas.

"I can hardly tell you what a comfort and relief it will be to me, Hyacinth, when you are once my wife — the mistress of my home — poor little Molly's mother and protector; but I wouldn't interfere with your previous engagements for the world. It wouldn't be right."

"Thank you, my own love. How good you are! So many men would think only of their own wishes and interests! I'm sure the parents of my dear pupils will admire you — will be quite surprised at your consideration for their interests."

"Don't tell them, then. I hate being admired. Why shouldn't you say it is your wish to keep on your school till they've had time to look out for another?"

"Because it isn't," said she, daring all. "I long to be making you happy; I want to make your home a place of rest and comfort to you; and I do so wish to cherish your sweet Molly, as I hope to do, when I come to be her mother. I can't take virtue to myself which doesn't belong to me. If I have to speak for myself, I shall say, 'Good people, find a school for your daughters by Michaelmas, — for after that time I must go and make the happiness of others.' I cant bear to think of your long rides in November — coming home wet at night with no one to take care of you. Oh! if you leave it to me, I shall advise the parents to take their daughters away from the care of one whose heart will be absent. Though I couldn't consent to any time before Michaelmas — that wouldn't be fair or right, and I'm sure you wouldn't urge me — you are too good."

"Well, if you think that they will consider we have acted uprightly by them, let it be Michaelmas with all my heart. What does Lady Cumnor say?"

"Oh! I told her I was afraid you wouldn't like waiting, because of your difficulties with your servants, and because of Molly — it would be so desirable to enter on the new relationship with her as soon as possible."

"To be sure; so it would. Poor child! I'm afraid the intelligence of my engagement has rather startled her."

"Cynthia will feel it deeply, too," said Mrs. Kirk-

patrick, unwilling to let her daughter be behind Mr. Gibson's in sensibility and affection.

"We will have her over to the wedding! She and Molly shall be bridesmaids," said Mr. Gibson, in the unguarded warmth of his heart.

This plan did not quite suit Mrs. Kirkpatrick: but she thought it best not to oppose it, until she had a presentable excuse to give, and perhaps also some reason would naturally arise out of future circumstances; so at this time she only smiled, and softly pressed the hand she held in hers.

It is a question whether Mrs. Kirkpatrick or Molly wished the most for the day to be over which they were to spend together at the Towers. Mrs. Kirkpatrick was rather weary of girls as a class. All the trials of her life were connected with girls in some way. She was very young when she first became a governess, and had been worsted in her struggles with her pupils, in the first place she ever went to. Her elegance of appearance and manner, and her accomplishments, more than her character and aquirements, had rendered it easier for her than for most to obtain good "situations;" and she had been absolutely petted in some; but still she was constantly encountering naughty or stubborn, or over-conscientious, or severe-judging, or curious and observant girls. And again, before Cynthia was born, she had longed for a boy, thinking it possible that if some three or four intervening relations died, he might come to be a baronet; and instead of a son, lo and behold it was a daughter! Nevertheless, with all her dislike to girls in the abstract as "the plagues of her life" (and her aversion was not diminished by the fact of her having kept a school for "young ladies" at

Ashcombe), she really meant to be as kind as she could be to her new step-daughter, whom she remembered principally as a black-haired, sleepy child, in whose eyes she had read admiration of herself. Mrs. Kirkpatrick accepted Mr. Gibson principally because she was tired of the struggle of earning her own livelihood; but she liked him personally — nay, she even loved him in her torpid way, and she intended to be good to his daughter, though she felt as if it would have been easier for her to have been good to his son.

Molly was bracing herself up in her way too. "I will be like Harriet. I will think of others. I won't think of myself," she kept repeating all the way to the Towers. But there was no selfishness in wishing that the day was come to an end, and that she did very heartily. Mrs. Hamley sent her thither in the carriage, which was to wait and bring her back at night. Mrs. Hamley wanted Molly to make a favourable impression, and she sent for her to come and show herself before she set out.

"Don't put on your silk gown — your white muslin will look the nicest, my dear."

"Not my silk? it is quite new! I had it to come here."

"Still, I think your white muslin suits you the best." 'Anything but that horrid plaid silk' was the thought in Mrs. Hamley's mind; and, thanks to her, Molly set off for the Towers, looking a little quaint, it is true, but thoroughly lady-like, if she was old-fashioned. Her father was to meet her there; but he had been detained, and she had to face Mrs. Kirkpatrick by herself, the recollection of her last day of misery

at the Towers fresh in her mind as if it had been yesterday. Mrs. Kirkpatrick was as caressing as could be. She held Molly's hand in hers, as they sate together in the library, after the first salutations were over. She kept stroking it from time to time, and purring out inarticulate sounds of loving satisfaction, as she gazed in the blushing face.

"What eyes! so like your dear father's! How we shall love each other — shan't we, darling? For his sake!"

"I'll try," said Molly, bravely; and then she could not finish her sentence.

"And you've just got the same beautiful black curling hair!" said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, softly lifting one of Molly's curls from off her white temple.

"Papa's hair is growing grey," said Molly.

"Is it? I never see it. I never shall see it. He will always be to me the handsomest of men."

Mr. Gibson was really a very handsome man, and Molly was pleased with the compliment, but she could not help saying, —

"Still he will grow old, and his hair will grow grey. I think he will be just as handsome, but it won't be as a young man."

"Ah! that's just it, love. He'll always be handsome; some people always are. And he is so fond of you, dear." Molly's colour flashed into her face. She did not want an assurance of her own father's love from this strange woman. She could not help being angry; all she could do was to keep silent. "You don't know how he speaks of you; 'his little treasure,' as he calls you. I'm almost jealous sometimes."

Molly took her hand away, and her heart began

to harden; these speeches were so discordant to her. But she set her teeth together, and "tried to be good."

"We must make him so happy. I'm afraid he has had a great deal to annoy him at home; but we will do away with all that now. You must tell me," seeing the cloud in Molly's eyes, "what he likes and dislikes, for of course you will know."

Molly's face cleared a little; of course she did know. She had not watched and loved him so long without believing that she understood him better than any one else: though how he had come to like Mrs. Kirkpatrick enough to wish to marry her, was an unsolved problem that she unconsciously put aside as inexplicable. Mrs. Kirkpatrick went on, — "All men have their fancies and antipathies, even the wisest. I have known some gentlemen annoyed beyond measure by the merest trifles; leaving a door open, or spilling tea in their saucers, or a shawl crookedly put on. Why," continued she, lowering her voice, "I know of a house to which Lord Hollingford will never be asked because he didn't wipe his shoes on both the mats in the hall! Now you must tell me what your dear father dislikes most in these fanciful ways, and I shall take care to avoid it. You must be my little friend and helper in pleasing him. It will be such a pleasure to me to attend to his slightest fancies. About my dress, too — what colours does he like best? I want to do everything in my power with a view to his approval."

Molly was gratified by all this, and began to think that really, after all, perhaps her father had done well for himself; and that if she could help towards his new happiness, she ought to do it. So she tried very conscientiously to think over Mr. Gibson's wishes and ways;

to ponder over what annoyed him the most in his household.

"I think," said she, "papa isn't particular about many things; but I think our not having the dinner quite punctual — quite ready for him when he comes in, fidgets him more than anything. You see, he has often had a long ride, and there is another long ride to come, and he has only half-an-hour — sometimes only a quarter — to eat his dinner in."

"Thank you, my own love. Punctuality! Yes; it's a great thing in a household. It's what I've had to enforce with my young ladies at Ashcombe. No wonder poor dear Mr. Gibson has been displeased at his dinner not being ready, and he so hard-worked!"

"Papa doesn't care what he has, if it's only ready. He would take bread-and-cheese, if cook would only send it in instead of dinner."

"Bread-and-cheese! Does Mr. Gibson eat cheese?"

"Yes; he's very fond of it," said Molly, innocently. "I've known him eat toasted cheese when he has been too tired to fancy anything else."

"Oh! but, my dear, we must change all that. I shouldn't like to think of your father eating cheese; it's such a strong-smelling, coarse kind of thing. We must get him a cook who can toss him up an omelette, or something elegant. Cheese is only fit for the kitchen."

"Papa is very fond of it," persevered Molly.

"Oh! but we will cure him of that. I couldn't bear the smell of cheese; and I'm sure he would be sorry to annoy me."

Molly was silent; it did not do, she found, to be too minute in telling about her father's likes or dis-

likes. She had better leave them for Mrs. Kirkpatrick to find out for herself. It was an awkward pause; each was trying to find something agreeable to say. Molly spoke at length. "Please! I should so like to know something about Cynthia — your daughter."

"Yes, call her Cynthia. It's a pretty name, isn't it? Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Not so pretty, though, as my old name, Hyacinth Clare. People used to say it suited me so well. I must show you an acrostic a gentleman — he was a lieutenant in the 53rd — made upon it. Oh! we shall have a great deal to say to each other, I foresee!"

"But about Cynthia?"

"Oh, yes! about dear Cynthia. What do you want to know, my dear?"

"Papa said she was to live with us! When will she come?"

"Oh, was it not sweet of your kind father? I thought of nothing else but Cynthia's going out as a governess when she had completed her education; she has been brought up for it, and has had great advantages. But good dear Mr. Gibson wouldn't hear of it. He said yesterday that she must come and live with us when she left school."

"When will she leave school?"

"She went for two years. I don't think I must let her leave before next summer. She teaches English as well as learning French. Next summer she shall come home, and then shan't we be a happy little quartette?"

"I hope so," said Molly. "But she is to come to the wedding, isn't she?" she went on timidly, not

knowing how far Mrs. Kirkpatrick would like the allusion to her marriage.

"Your father has begged for her to come; but we must think about it a little more before quite fixing it. The journey is a great expense!"

"Is she like you? I do so want to see her."

"She is very handsome, people say. In the bright-coloured style, — perhaps something like what I was. But I like the darkhaired foreign kind of beauty best — just now," touching Molly's hair, and looking at her with an expression of sentimental remembrance.

"Does Cynthia — is she very clever and accomplished?" asked Molly, a little afraid lest the answer should remove Miss Kirkpatrick at too great a distance from her.

"She ought to be; I've paid ever so much money to have her taught by the best masters. But you will see her before long, and I'm afraid we must go now to Lady Cumnor. It has been very charming having you all to myself, but I know Lady Cumnor will be expecting us now, and she was very curious to see you, — my future daughter, as she calls you."

Molly followed Mrs. Kirkpatrick into the morning-room, where Lady Cumnor was sitting — a little annoyed, because, having completed her toilette earlier than usual, Clare had not been aware by instinct of the fact, and so had not brought Molly Gibson for inspection a quarter of an hour before. Every small occurrence is an event in the day of a convalescent invalid, and a little while ago Molly would have met with patronizing appreciation, where now she had to encounter criticism. Of Lady Cumnor's character as an individual she knew nothing; she only knew she

was going to see and be seen by a live countess; nay, more, by "*the* countess" of Hollingford.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick led her into Lady Cumnor's presence by the hand, and in presenting her, said, — "My dear little daughter, Lady Cumnor!"

"Now, Clare, don't let me have nonsense. She is not your daughter yet, and may never be, — I believe that one-third of the engagements I have heard of, have never come to marriages. Miss Gibson, I am very glad to see you, for your father's sake; when I know you better, I hope it will be for your own."

Molly very heartily hoped that she might never be known any better by the stern-looking lady who sate so uprightly in the easy chair, prepared for lounging, and which therefore gave all the more effect to the stiff attitude. Lady Cumnor luckily took Molly's silence for acquiescent humility, and went on speaking after a further little pause of inspection.

"Yes, yes, I like her looks, Clare. You may make something of her. It will be a great advantage to you, my dear, to have a lady who has trained up several young people of quality always about you just at the time when you are growing up. I'll tell you what, Clare!" — a sudden thought striking her, — "you and she must become better acquainted — you know nothing of each other at present; you are not to be married till Christmas, and what could be better than that she should go back with you to Ashcombe! She would be with you constantly, and have the advantage of the companionship of your young people, which would be a good thing for an only child! It's a capital plan; I'm very glad I thought of it!"

Now it would be difficult to say which of Lady

Cumnor's two hearers was the most dismayed at the idea which had taken possession of her. Mrs. Kirkpatrick had no fancy for being encumbered with a step-daughter before her time. If Molly came to be an inmate of her house, farewell to many little background economies, and a still more serious farewell to many little indulgences, that were innocent enough in themselves, but which Mrs. Kirkpatrick's former life had caused her to look upon as sins to be concealed: the dirty dog's-eared delightful novel from the Ashcombe circulating library, the leaves of which she turned over with a pair of scissors; the lounging-chair which she had for use at her own home, straight and upright as she sate now in Lady Cumnor's presence; the dainty morsel, savoury and small, to which she treated herself for her own solitary supper, — all these and many other similarly pleasant things would have to be foregone if Molly came to be her pupil, parlour-boarder, or visitor, as Lady Cumnor was planning. One — two things Clare was instinctively resolved upon: to be married at Michaelmas, and not to have Molly at Ashcombe. But she smiled as sweetly as if the plan proposed was the most charming project in the world, while all the time her poor brains were beating about in every bush for the reasons or excuses of which she should make use at some future time. Molly, however, saved her all this trouble. It was a question which of the three was the most surprised by the words which burst out of her lips. She did not mean to speak, but her heart was very full, and almost before she was aware of her thought she heard herself saying, —

"I don't think it would be nice at all. I mean,

my lady, that I should dislike it very much; it would be taking me away from papa just these very few last months. I will like you," she went on, her eyes full of tears; and, turning to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, she put her hand into her future stepmother's with the prettiest and most trustful action. "I will try hard to love you, and to do all I can to make you happy; but you must not take me away from papa just this very last bit of time that I shall have him."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick fondled the hand thus placed in hers, and was grateful to the girl for her outspoken opposition to Lady Cumnor's plan. Clare was, however, exceedingly unwilling to back up Molly by any words of her own until Lady Cumnor had spoken and given the cue. But there was something in Molly's little speech, or in her straightforward manner, that amused instead of irritating Lady Cumnor in her present mood. Perhaps she was tired of the silkiness with which she had been shut up for so many days.

She put up her glasses, and looked at them both before speaking. Then she said — "Upon my word, young lady! Why, Clare, you've got your work before you! Not but what there is a good deal of truth in what she says. It must be very disagreeable to a girl of her age to have a stepmother coming in between her father and herself, whatever may be the advantages to her in the long run."

Molly almost felt as if she could make a friend of the stiff old countess, for her clearness of sight as to the plan proposed being a trial; but she was afraid, in her new-born desire of thinking for others, of Mrs. Kirkpatrick being hurt. She need not have feared as far as outward signs went, for the smile was still on

that lady's pretty rosy lips, and the soft fondling of her hand never stopped. Lady Cumnor was more interested in Molly the more she looked at her; and her gaze was pretty steady through her gold-rimmed eyeglasses. She began a sort of catechism; a string of very straightforward questions, such as any lady under the rank of countess might have scrupled to ask, but which were not unkindly meant.

"You are sixteen, are you not?"

"No; I am seventeen. My birthday was three weeks ago."

"Very much the same thing, I should think. Have you ever been to school?"

"No, never! Miss Eyre has taught me everything I know."

"Umph! Miss Eyre was your governess, I suppose? I should not have thought your father could have afforded to keep a governess. But of course he must know his own affairs best."

"Certainly, my lady," replied Molly, a little touchy as to any reflections on her father's wisdom.

"You say 'certainly!' as if it was a matter of course that every one should know their own affairs best. You are very young, Miss Gibson — very. You'll know better before you come to my age. And I suppose you've been taught music, and the use of globes, and French, and all the usual accomplishments, since you have had a governess? I never heard of such nonsense!" she went on, lashing herself up. "An only daughter! If there had been half-a-dozen, there might have been some sense in it."

Molly did not speak, but it was by a strong effort that she kept silence. Mrs. Kirkpatrick fondled her

hand more perseveringly than ever, hoping thus to express a sufficient amount of sympathy to prevent her from saying anything injudicious. But the caress had become wearisome to Molly, and only irritated her nerves. She took her hand out of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's with a slight manifestation of impatience.

It was, perhaps, fortunate for the general peace that just at this moment Mr. Gibson was announced. It is odd enough to see how the entrance of a person of the opposite sex into an assemblage of either men or women calms down the little discordances and the disturbance of mood. It was the case now; at Mr. Gibson's entrance my lady took off her glasses, and smoothed her brow; Mrs. Kirkpatrick managed to get up a very becoming blush, and as for Molly, her face glowed with delight, and the white teeth and pretty dimples came out like sunlight on a landscape.

Of course, after the first greeting, my lady had to have a private interview with her doctor; and Molly and her future stepmother wandered about in the gardens with their arms round each other's waists, or hand in hand, like two babes in the wood; Mrs. Kirkpatrick active in such endearments, Molly passive, and feeling within herself very shy and strange, for she had that particular kind of shy modesty which makes any one uncomfortable at receiving caresses from a person towards whom the heart does not go forth with an impulsive welcome.

Then came the early dinner; Lady Cumnor having hers in the quiet of her own room, to which she was still a prisoner. Once or twice during the meal, the idea crossed Molly's mind that her father disliked his position as a middle-aged lover being made so evident to

the men in waiting as it was by Mrs. Kirkpatrick's affectionate speeches and innuendos. He tried to banish every tint of pink sentimentalism from the conversation, and to confine it to matter of fact; and when Mrs. Kirkpatrick would persevere in referring to such things as had a bearing on the future relationship of the parties, he insisted upon viewing them in the most matter-of-fact way; and this continued even after the men had left the room. An old rhyme Molly had heard Betty use, would keep running in her head and making her uneasy, —

> Two is company,
> Three is trumpery.

But where could she go to in that strange house? What ought she to do? She was roused from this fit of wonder and abstraction by her father's saying — "What do you think of this plan of Lady Cumnor's? She says she was advising you to have Molly as a visitor at Ashcombe until we are married."

Mrs. Kirkpatrick's countenance fell. If only Molly would be so good as to testify again, as she had done before Lady Cumnor! But if the proposal was made by her father, it would come to his daughter from a different quarter than it had done from a strange lady, be she ever so great. Molly did not say anything; she only looked pale, and wistful, and anxious. Mrs. Kirkpatrick had to speak for herself.

"It would be a charming plan, only — Well! we know why we would rather not have it, don't we, love? And we won't tell papa, for fear of making him vain. No! I think I must leave her with you, dear Mr. Gibson, for a *tête-à-tête* for these last few weeks. It would be cruel to take her away."

"But you know, my dear, I told you of the reason why it does not do to have Molly at home just at present," said Mr. Gibson, eagerly. For the more he knew of his future wife, the more he felt it necessary to remember that, with all her foibles, she would be able to stand between Molly and any such adventures as that which had occurred lately with Mr. Coxe; so that one of the good reasons for the step he had taken was always present to him, while it had slipped off the smooth surface of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's mirror-like mind without leaving any impression. She now recalled it, on seeing Mr. Gibson's anxious face.

But what were Molly's feelings at these last words of her father's? She had been sent from home for some reason, kept a secret from her, but told to this strange woman. Was there to be perfect confidence between these two, and she to be for ever shut out? Was she, and what concerned her — though how she did not know — to be discussed between them for the future, and she to be kept in the dark? A bitter pang of jealousy made her heart-sick. She might as well go to Ashcombe, or anywhere else, now. Thinking more of others' happiness than of her own was very fine; but did it not mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the true desires, that made her herself? Yet in this deadness lay her only comfort; or so it seemed. Wandering in such mazes, she hardly knew how the conversation went on; a third was indeed "trumpery," where there was entire confidence between the two who were company, from which the other was shut out. She was positively unhappy, and her father did not appear to see it; he was absorbed with his new plans and his new wife that

was to be. But he did notice it; and was truly sorry for his little girl: only he thought that there was a greater chance for the future harmony of the household, if he did not lead Molly to define her present feelings by putting them into words. It was his general plan to repress emotion by not showing the sympathy he felt. Yet, when he had to leave, he took Molly's hand in his, and held it there, in such a different manner to that in which Mrs. Kirkpatrick had done; and his voice softened to his child as he bade her good-by, and added the words (most unusual to him), "God bless you, child!"

Molly had held up all the day bravely; she had not shown anger, or repugnance, or annoyance, or regret; but when once more by herself in the Hamley carriage, she burst into a passion of tears, and cried her fill till she reached the village of Hamley. Then she tried in vain to smooth her face into smiles, and do away with the other signs of her grief. She only hoped she could run upstairs to her own room without notice, and bathe her eyes in cold water before she was seen. But at the hall-door she was caught by the squire and Roger coming in from an after-dinner stroll in the garden, and hospitably anxious to help her to alight. Roger saw the state of things in an instant, and saying, —

"My mother has been looking for you to come back for this last hour," he led the way to the drawing-room. But Mrs. Hamley was not there; the squire had stopped to speak to the coachman about one of the horses; they two were alone. Roger said, —

"I am afraid you have had a very trying day. I have thought of you several times, for I know how awkward these new relations are."

"Thank you," said she, her lips trembling, and on the point of crying again. "I did try to remember what you said, and to think more of others, but it is so difficult sometimes; you know it is, don't you?"

"Yes," said he, gravely. He was gratified by her simple confession of having borne his words of advice in mind, and tried to act up to them. He was but a very young man, and he was honestly flattered; perhaps this led him on to offer more advice, and this time it was evidently mingled with sympathy. He did not want to draw out her confidence, which he felt might very easily be done with such a simple girl; but he wished to help her by giving her a few of the principles on which he had learnt to rely. "It is difficult," he went on, "but by-and-by you will be so much happier for it."

"No, I shan't!" said Molly, shaking her head. "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again."

There was an unconscious depth in what she said, that Roger did not know how to answer at the moment; it was easier to address himself to the assertion of the girl of seventeen, that she should never be happy again.

"Nonsense: perhaps in ten years' time you will be looking back on this trial as a very light one — who knows?"

"I daresay it seems foolish; perhaps all our earthly trials will appear foolish to us after a while; perhaps they seem so now to angels. But we are ourselves,

you know, and this is *now*, not some time to come, a long, long way off. And we are not angels, to be comforted by seeing the ends for which everything is sent."

She had never spoken so long a sentence to him before; and when she had said it, though she did not take her eyes away from his, as they stood steadily looking at each other, she blushed a little; she could not have told why. Nor did he tell himself why a sudden pleasure came over him as he gazed at her simple expressive face — and for a moment lost the sense of what she was saying, in the sensation of pity for her sad earnestness. In an instant more he was himself again. Only it is pleasant to the wisest, most reasonable youth of one or two and twenty to find himself looked up to as a Mentor by a girl of seventeen.

"I know, I understand. Yes: it is *now* we have to do with. Don't let us go into metaphysics." Molly opened her eyes wide at this. Had she been talking metaphysics without knowing it? "One looks forward to a mass of trials, which will only have to be encountered one by one, little by little. Oh, here is my mother! she will tell you better than I can."

And the *tête-à-tête* was merged in a trio. Mrs. Hamley lay down; she had not been well all day — she had missed Molly, she said, — and now she wanted to hear of all the adventures that had occurred to the girl at the Towers. Molly sate on a stool close to the head of the sofa, and Roger, though at first he took up a book and tried to read that he might be no restraint, soon found his reading all a pretence: it was so interesting to listen to Molly's little narrative, and, beside

if he could give her any help in her time of need, was it not his duty to make himself acquainted with all the circumstances of her case?

And so they went on during all the remaining time of Molly's stay at Hamley. Mrs. Hamley sympathized, and liked to hear details; as the French say, her sympathy was given *en détail*, the squire's *en gros*. He was very sorry for her evident grief, and almost felt guilty, as if he had had a share in bringing it about, by the mention he had made of the possibility of Mr. Gibson's marrying again, when first Molly came on her visit to them. He said to his wife more than once,—

"'Pon my word, now, I wish I'd never spoken those unlucky words that first day at dinner. Do you remember how she took them up? It was like a prophecy of what was to come, now, wasn't it? And she looked pale from that day, and I don't think she has ever fairly enjoyed her food since. I must take more care what I say for the future. Not but what Gibson is doing the very best thing, both for himself and her, that he can do. I told him so only yesterday. But I'm very sorry for the little girl, though. I wish I'd never spoken about it, that I do! but it was like a prophecy, wasn't it?"

Roger tried hard to find out a reasonable and right method of comfort, for he, too, in his way, was sorry for the girl, who bravely struggled to be cheerful, in spite of her own private grief, for his mother's sake. He felt as if high principle and noble precept ought to perform an immediate work. But they do not, for there is always the unknown quantity of individual experience and feeling, which offer a tacit resistance, the amount incalculable by another, to all good counsel

and high decree. But the bond between the Mentor and his Telemachus strengthened every day. He endeavoured to lead her out of morbid thought into interest in other than personal things; and, naturally enough, his own objects of interest came readiest to hand. She felt that he did her good, she did not know why or how; but after a talk with him, she always fancied that she had got the clue to goodness and peace, whatever befell.

CHAPTER XII.

Preparing for the Wedding.

MEANWHILE the love-affairs between the middle-aged couple were prospering well, after a fashion; after the fashion that they liked best, although it might probably have appeared dull and prosaic to younger people. Lord Cumnor had come down in great glee at the news he had heard from his wife at the Towers. He, too, seemed to think he had taken an active part in bringing about the match by only speaking about it. His first words on the subject to Lady Cumnor were, —

"I told you so. Now didn't I say what a good, suitable affair this affair between Gibson and Clare would be! I don't know when I have been so much pleased. You may despise the trade of matchmaker, my lady, but I am very proud of it. After this, I shall go on looking out for suitable cases among the middle-aged people of my acquaintance. I shan't meddle with young folks, they are so apt to be fanciful; but I have been so successful in this, that I do think it is good encouragement to go on."

"Go on — with what?" asked Lady Cumnor, drily. "Oh, planning!"

"You can't deny that I planned this match."

"I don't think you are likely to do either much good or harm by planning," she replied, with cool, good sense.

"It puts it into people's heads, my dear."

"Yes, if you speak about your plans to them, of course it does. But in this case you never spoke to either Mr. Gibson or Clare, did you?"

All at once the recollection of how Clare had come upon the passage in Lord Cumnor's letter flashed on his lady, but she did not say anything about it, but left her husband to flounder about as best he might.

"No! I never spoke to them; of course not."

"Then you must be strongly mesmeric, and your will acted upon theirs, if you are to take credit for any part in the affair," continued his pitiless wife.

"I really can't say. It's no use looking back to what I said or did. I'm very well satisfied with it, and that's enough, and I mean to show them how much I'm pleased. I shall give Clare something towards her rigging out, and they shall have a breakfast at Ashcombe Manor-house. I'll write to Preston about it. When did you say they were to be married?"

"I think they'd better wait till Christmas, and I have told them so. It would amuse the children, going over to Ashcombe for the wedding; and if it's bad weather during the holidays I'm always afraid of their finding it dull at the Towers. It's very different if it's a good frost, and they can go out skating and sledging in the park. But these last two years it has been so wet for them, poor dears!"

"And will the other poor dears be content to wait to make a holiday for your grandchildren? 'To make a Roman holiday.' Pope, or somebody else, has a line of poetry like that. 'To make a Roman holiday,'" — he repeated, pleased with his unusual aptitude at quotation.

"It's Byron, and it's nothing to do with the subject in hand. I'm surprised at your lordship's quoting Byron, — he was a very immoral poet."

"I saw him take his oaths in the House of Lords," said Lord Cumnor, apologetically.

"Well! the less said about him the better," said Lady Cumnor. "I have told Clare that she had better not think of being married before Christmas: and it won't do for her to give up her school in a hurry either."

But Clare did not intend to wait till Christmas; and for this once she carried her point against the will of the countess, and without many words, or any open opposition. She had a harder task in setting aside Mr. Gibson's desire to have Cynthia over for the wedding, even if she went back to her school at Boulogne directly after the ceremony. At first she had said that it would be delightful, a charming plan; only she feared that she must give up her own wishes to have her child near her at such a time, on account of the expense of the double journey.

But Mr. Gibson, economical as he was in his habitual expenditure, had a really generous heart. He had already shown it, in entirely relinquishing his future wife's life-interest in the very small property the late Mr. Kirkpatrick had left, in favour of Cynthia; while he arranged that she should come to his home as a daughter as soon as she left the school she was at. The life-interest was about thirty pounds a year. Now he gave Mrs. Kirkpatrick three five-pound notes, saying that he hoped they would do away with the objections to Cynthia's coming over to the wedding; and at the time Mrs. Kirkpatrick felt as if they would,

and caught the reflection of his strong wish, and fancied it was her own. If the letter could have been written and the money sent off that day while the reflected glow of affection lasted, Cynthia would have been bridesmaid to her mother. But a hundred little interruptions came in the way of letter-writing; and the value affixed to the money increased: money had been so much needed, so hardly earned in Mrs. Kirkpatrick's life; while the perhaps necessary separation of mother and child had lessened the amount of affection the former had to bestow. So she persuaded herself, afresh, that it would be unwise to disturb Cynthia at her studies; to interrupt the fulfilment of her duties just after the *semestre* had begun afresh; and she wrote a letter to Madame Lefevre so well imbued with this persuasion, that an answer which was almost an echo of her words was returned, the sense of which being conveyed to Mr. Gibson, who was no great French scholar, settled the vexed question, to his moderate but unfeigned regret. But the fifteen pounds were not returned. Indeed, not merely that sum, but a great part of the hundred which Lord Cumnor had given her for her trousseau, was required to pay off debts at Ashcombe; for the school had been anything but flourishing since Mrs. Kirkpatrick had had it. It was very much to her credit that she preferred clearing herself from debt to purchasing wedding finery. But it was one of the few points to be respected in Mrs. Kirkpatrick that she had always been careful in payment to the shops where she dealt; it was a little sense of duty cropping out. Whatever other faults might arise from her superficial and flimsy character, she was always uneasy till she was out of debt. Yet she had

no scruple in appropriating her future husband's money to her own use, when it was decided that it was not to be employed as he intended. What new articles she bought for herself, were all such as would make a show, and an impression upon the ladies of Hollingford. She argued with herself that linen, and all underclothing, would never be seen; while she knew that every gown she had, would give rise to much discussion, and would be counted up in the little town.

So her stock of underclothing was very small, and scarcely any of it new; but it was made of dainty material, and was finely mended up by her deft fingers, many a night long after her pupils were in bed; inwardly resolving all the time she sewed, that hereafter some one else should do her plain-work. Indeed, many a little circumstance of former subjection to the will of others rose up before her during these quiet hours, as an endurance or a suffering never to occur again. So apt are people to look forward to a different kind of life from that to which they have been accustomed, as being free from care and trial! She recollected how, one time during this very summer at the Towers, after she was engaged to Mr. Gibson, when she had taken above an hour to arrange her hair in some new mode carefully studied from Mrs. Bradley's fashion-book — after all, when she came down, looking her very best, as she thought, and ready for her lover, Lady Cumnor had sent her back again to her room, just as if she had been a little child, to do her hair over again, and not to make such a figure of fun of herself! Another time she had been sent to change her gown for one in her opinion far less becoming, but which suited Lady Cumnor's taste better. These were

little things; but they were late samples of what in different shapes she had had to endure for many years; and her liking for Mr. Gibson grew in proportion to her sense of the evils from which he was going to serve as a means of escape. After all, that interval of hope and plain-sewing, intermixed though it was by tuition, was not disagreeable. Her wedding-dress was secure. Her former pupils at the Towers were going to present her with that; they were to dress her from head to foot on the auspicious day. Lord Cumnor, as has been said, had given her a hundred pounds for her trousseau, and had sent Mr. Preston a carte-blanche order for the wedding-breakfast in the old hall in Ashcombe Manor-house. Lady Cumnor — a little put out by the marriage not being deferred till her grandchildren's Christmas holidays — had nevertheless given Mrs. Kirkpatrick an excellent English-made watch and chain; more clumsy but more serviceable than the little foreign elegance that had hung at her side so long, and misled her so often.

Her preparations were thus in a very considerable state of forwardness, while Mr. Gibson had done nothing as yet towards any new arrangement or decoration of his house for his intended bride. He knew he ought to do something. But what? Where to begin, when so much was out of order, and he had so little time for superintendence? At length he came to the wise decision of asking one of the Miss Brownings, for old friendship's sake, to take the trouble of preparing what was immediately requisite; and resolved to leave all the more ornamental decorations that he proposed, to the taste of his future wife. But before making his request, he had to tell of his engagement, which had

hitherto been kept a secret from the towns-people, who had set down his frequent visits at the Towers to the score of the countess's health. He felt how he should have laughed in his sleeve at any middle-aged widower who came to him with a confession of the kind he had now to make to Miss Brownings, and disliked the idea of the necessary call: but it was to be done, so one evening he went in "promiscuous," as they called it, and told them his story. At the end of the first chapter — that is to say, at the end of the story of Mr. Coxe's calf-love, Miss Browning held up her hands in surprise.

"To think of Molly, as I have held in long-clothes, coming to have a lover! Well, to be sure! Sister Phœbe —" (she was just coming into the room), "here's a piece of news! Molly Gibson has got a lover! One may almost say she's had an offer! Mr. Gibson, may not one? — and she's but sixteen!"

"Seventeen, sister," said Miss Phœbe, who piqued herself on knowing all about dear Mr. Gibson's domestic affairs. "Seventeen, the 22nd of last June."

"Well, have it your own way. Seventeen, if you like to call her so!" said Miss Browning, impatiently. "The fact is still the same — she's got a lover; and it seems to me she was in long-clothes only yesterday."

"I'm sure I hope her course of true love will run smooth," said Miss Phœbe.

Now Mr. Gibson came in; for his story was not half told, and he did not want them to run away too far with the idea of Molly's love-affair.

"Molly knows nothing about it. I haven't even named it to any one but you two, and to one other

friend. I trounced Coxe well, and did my best to keep his attachment — as he calls it — in bounds. But I was sadly puzzled what to do about Molly. Miss Eyre was away, and I couldn't leave them in the house together without any older woman."

"Oh, Mr. Gibson! why did you not send her to us?" broke in Miss Browning. "We would have done anything in our power for you; for your sake, as well as her poor dear mother's."

"Thank you. I know you would, but it wouldn't have done to have had her in Hollingford, just at the time of Coxe's effervescence. He's better now. His appetite has come back with double force, after the fasting he thought it right to exhibit. He had three helpings of black-currant dumpling yesterday."

"I am sure you are most liberal, Mr. Gibson. Three helpings! And, I dare say, butcher's meat in proportion?"

"Oh! I only named it because, with such very young men, it's generally see-saw between appetite and love, and I thought the third helping a very good sign. But still, you know, what has happened once, may happen again."

"I don't know. Phœbe had an offer of marriage once —" said Miss Browning.

"Hush! sister. It might hurt his feelings to have it spoken about."

"Nonsense, child! It's five-and-twenty years ago; and his eldest daughter is married herself."

"I own he has not been constant," pleaded Miss Phœbe, in her tender, piping voice. "All men are not — like you, Mr. Gibson — faithful to the memory of their first-love."

Mr. Gibson winced. Jeannie was his first love; but her name had never been breathed in Hollingford. His wife — good, pretty, sensible, and beloved as she had been — was not his second; no, nor his third love. And now he was come to make a confidence about his second marriage.

"Well, well," said he; "at any rate, I thought I must do something to protect Molly from such affairs while she was so young, and before I had given my sanction. Miss Eyre's little nephew fell ill of scarlet fever —"

"Ah! by-the-by, how careless of me not to inquire. How is the poor little fellow?"

"Worse — better. It doesn't signify to what I've go to say now; the fact was, Miss Eyre couldn't come back to my house for some time, and I cannot leave Molly altogether at Hamley."

"Ah! I see now, why there was that sudden visit to Hamley. Upon my word, it's quite a romance."

"I do like hearing of a love-affair," murmured Miss Phœbe.

"Then if you'll let me get on with my story, you shall hear of mine," said Mr. Gibson, quite beyond his patience with their constant interruptions.

"Yours!" said Miss Phœbe, faintly.

"Bless us and save us!" said Miss Browning, with less sentiment in her tone; "what next?"

"My marriage, I hope," said Mr. Gibson, choosing to take her expression of intense surprise literally. "And that's what I came to speak to you about."

A little hope darted up in Miss Phœbe's breast. She had often said to her sister, in the confidence of curling-time (ladies wore curls in those days), "that the

only man who could ever bring her to think of matrimony was Mr. Gibson; but that if he ever proposed, she should feel bound to accept him, for poor dear Mary's sake;" never explaining what exact style of satisfaction she imagined she should give to her dead friend by marrying her late husband. Phœbe played nervously with the strings of her black silk apron. Like the Caliph in the Eastern story, a whole lifetime of possibilities passed through her mind in an instant, of which possibilities the question of questions was, Could she leave her sister? Attend, Phœbe, to the present moment, and listen to what is being said before you distress yourself with a perplexity which will never arise.

"Of course it has been an anxious thing for me to decide who I should ask to be the mistress of my family, the mother of my girl; but I think I've decided rightly at last. The lady I have chosen —"

"Tell us at once who she is, there's a good man," said straight-forward Miss Browning.

"Mrs. Kirkpatrick," said the bridegroom elect.

"What! the governess at the Towers, that the countess makes so much of?"

"Yes; she is much valued by them — and deservedly so. She keeps a school now at Ashcombe, and is accustomed to housekeeping. She has brought up the young ladies at the Towers, and has a daughter of her own, therefore it is probable she will have a kind, motherly feeling towards Molly."

"She's a very elegant-looking woman," said Miss Phœbe, feeling it incumbent upon her to say something laudatory, by way of concealing the thoughts that had just been passing through her mind. "I've seen her in

the carriage, riding backwards with the countess: a very pretty woman, I should say."

"Nonsense, sister," said Miss Browning. "What has her elegance or prettiness to do with the affair? Did you ever know a widower marry again for such trifles as those? It's always from a sense of duty of one kind or another—isn't it, Mr. Gibson? They want a housekeeper; or they want a mother for their children; or they think their last wife would have liked it."

Perhaps the thought had passed through the elder sister's mind that Phœbe might have been chosen, for there was a sharp acrimony in her tone; not unfamiliar to Mr. Gibson, but with which he did not choose to cope at this present moment.

"You must have it your own way, Miss Browning. Settle my motives for me. I don't pretend to be quite clear about them myself. But I am clear in wishing heartily to keep my old friends, and for them to love my future wife for my sake. I don't know any two women in the world, except Molly and Mrs. Kirkpatrick, I regard as much as I do you. Besides, I want to ask you if you will let Molly come and stay with you till after my marriage?"

"You might have asked us before you asked Madame Hamley," said Miss Browning, only half mollified. "We are your old friends; and we were her mother's friends, too; though we are not county folk."

"That's unjust," said Mr. Gibson. "And you know it is."

"I don't know. You are always with Lord Hollingford, when you can get at him, much more than you ever are with Mr. Goodenough, or Mr. Smith. And you are always going over to Hamley."

Miss Browning was not one to give in all at once.

"I seek Lord Hollingford as I should seek such a man, whatever his rank or position might be: usher to a school, carpenter, shoemaker, if it were possible for them to have had a similar character of mind developed by similar advantages. Mr. Goodenough is a very clever attorney, with strong local interests and not a thought beyond."

"Well, well, don't go on arguing, it always gives me a headache, as Phœbe knows. I didn't mean what I said, that's enough, isn't it? I'll retract anything sooner than be reasoned with. Where were we before you began your arguments?"

"About dear little Molly coming to pay us a visit," said Miss Phœbe.

"I should have asked you at first, only Coxe was so rampant with his love. I didn't know what he might do, or how troublesome he might be both to Molly and you. But he has cooled down now. Absence has had a very tranquillizing effect, and I think Molly may be in the same town with him, without any consequences beyond a few sighs every time she's brought to his mind by meeting her. And I've got another favour to ask of you, so you see it would never do for me to argue with you, Miss Browning, when I ought to be a humble suppliant. Something must be done to the house to make it all ready for the future Mrs. Gibson. It wants painting and papering shamefully, and I should think some new furniture, but I'm sure I don't know what. Would you be so very kind as to look over the place, and see how far a hundred pounds will go? The dining-room walls must be painted; we'll keep the drawing-room paper for her

choice, and I've a little spare money for that room for her to lay out; but all the rest of the house I'll leave to you, if you'll only be kind enough to help an old friend."

This was a commission which exactly gratified Miss Browning's love of power. The disposal of money involved patronage of trades-people, such as she had exercised in her father's lifetime, but had very little chance of showing since his death. Her usual good-humour was quite restored by this proof of confidence in her taste and economy, while Miss Phœbe's imagination dwelt rather on the pleasure of a visit from Molly.

CHAPTER XIII.

Molly Gibson's New Friends.

TIME was speeding on; it was now the middle of August, — if anything was to be done to the house, it must be done at once. Indeed, in several ways Mr. Gibson's arrangements with Miss Browning had not been made too soon. The squire had heard that Osborne might probably return home for a few days before going abroad; and, though the growing intimacy between Roger and Molly did not alarm him in the least, yet he was possessed by a very hearty panic lest the heir might take a fancy to the surgeon's daughter; and he was in such a fidget for her to leave the house before Osborne came home, that his wife lived in constant terror lest he should make it too obvious to their visitor.

Every young girl of seventeen or so, who is at all thoughtful, is very apt to make a Pope out of the first person who presents to her a new or larger system of duty than that by which she has been unconsciously guided hitherto. Such a Pope was Roger to Molly; she looked to his opinion, to his authority on almost every subject, yet he had only said one or two things in a terse manner which gave them the force of precepts — stable guides to her conduct — and had shown the natural superiority in wisdom and knowledge which is sure to exist between a highly educated young man of no common intelligence, and an ignorant girl of

seventeen, who yet was well capable of appreciation. Still, although they were drawn together in this very pleasant relationship, each was imagining some one very different for the future owner of their whole heart — their highest and completest love. Roger looked to find a grand woman, his equal, and his empress; beautiful in person, serene in wisdom, ready for counsel, as was Egeria. Molly's little wavering maiden fancy dwelt on the unseen Osborne, who was now a troubadour, and now a knight, such as he wrote about in one of his own poems; some one like Osborne, perhaps, rather than Osborne himself, for she shrank from giving a personal form and name to the hero that was to be. The squire was not unwise in wishing her well out of the house before Osborne came home, if he was considering her peace of mind. Yet, when she went away from the hall he missed her constantly; it had been so pleasant to have her there fulfilling all the pretty offices of a daughter; cheering the meals, so often *tête-à-tête* betwixt him and Roger, with her innocent wise questions, her lively interest in their talk, her merry replies to his banter.

And Roger missed her too. Sometimes her remarks had probed into his mind, and excited him to the deep thought in which he delighted; at other times he had felt himself of real help to her in her hours of need, and in making her take an interest in books, which treated of higher things than the continual fiction and poetry which she had hitherto read. He felt something like an affectionate tutor suddenly deprived of his most promising pupil; he wondered how she would go on without him; whether she would be puzzled and disheartened by the books he had lent her to read; how

she and her stepmother would get along together? She occupied his thoughts a good deal those first few days after she left the hall. Mrs. Hamley regretted her more, and longer than did the other two. She had given her the place of a daughter in her heart; and now she missed the sweet feminine companionship, the playful caresses, the never-ceasing attentions; the very need of sympathy in her sorrows, that Molly had shown so openly from time to time; all these things had extremely endeared her to the tender-hearted Mrs. Hamley.

Molly, too, felt the change of atmosphere keenly; and she blamed herself for so feeling even more keenly still. But she could not help having a sense of refinement, which had made her appreciate the whole manner of being at the Hall. By her dear old friends the Miss Brownings she was petted and caressed so much that she became ashamed of noticing the coarser and louder tones in which they spoke, the provincialism of their pronunciation, the absence of interest in things, and their greediness of details about persons. They asked her questions which she was puzzled enough to answer about her future stepmother; her loyalty to her father forbidding her to reply fully and truthfully. She was always glad when they began to make inquiries as to every possible affair at the Hall. She had been so happy there; she had liked them all, down to the very dogs, so thoroughly, that it was easy work replying: she did not mind telling them everything, even to the style of Mrs. Hamley's invalid dress; nor what wine the squire drank at dinner. Indeed, talking about these things helped her to recall the happiest time in her life. But one evening, as they were all sitting to-

gether after tea in the little upstairs drawing-room, looking into the High Street — Molly discoursing away on the various pleasures of Hamley Hall, and just then telling of all Roger's wisdom in natural science, and some of the curiosities he had shown her, she was suddenly pulled up by this little speech, —

"You seem to have seen a great deal of Mr. Roger, Molly!" said Miss Browning, in a way intended to convey a great deal of meaning to her sister and none at all to Molly. But —

> The man recovered of the bite;
> The dog it was that died.

Molly was perfectly aware of Miss Browning's emphatic tone, though at first she was perplexed as to its cause; while Miss Phœbe was just then too much absorbed in knitting the heel of her stocking to be fully alive to her sister's words and winks.

"Yes; he was very kind to me," said Molly, slowly, pondering over Miss Browning's manner, and unwilling to say more until she had satisfied herself to what the question tended.

"I daresay you will soon be going to Hamley Hall again? He's not the eldest son, you know, Phœbe! Don't make my head ache with your eternal 'eighteen, nineteen,' but attend to the conversation. Molly is telling us how much she saw of Mr. Roger, and how kind he was to her. I've always heard he was a very nice young man, my dear. Tell us some more about him! Now, Phœbe, attend! How was he kind to you, Molly?"

"Oh, he told me what books to read; and one day he made me notice how many bees I saw —"

"Bees, child! What do you mean? Either you or he must have been crazy!"

"No, not at all. There are more than two hundred kinds of bees in England, and he wanted me to notice the difference between them and flies. Miss Browning, I can't help seeing what you fancy," said Molly, as red as fire, "but it is very wrong; it is all a mistake. I won't speak another word about Mr. Roger or Hamley at all, if it puts such silly notions into your head."

"Highty-tighty! Here's a young lady to be lecturing her elders! Silly notions indeed! They are in your head, it seems. And let me tell you, Molly, you are too young to let your mind be running on lovers."

Molly had been once or twice called saucy and impertinent, and certainly a little sauciness came out now.

"I never said what the 'silly notion' was, Miss Browning; did I now, Miss Phœbe? Don't you see, dear Miss Phœbe, it is all her own interpretation, and according to her own fancy, this foolish talk about lovers?"

Molly was flaming with indignation; but she had appealed to the wrong person for justice. Miss Phœbe tried to make peace after the fashion of weak-minded people, who would cover over the unpleasant sight of a sore, instead of trying to heal it.

"I'm sure I don't know anything about it, my dear. It seems to me that what Clarinda was saying was very true — very true indeed; and I think, love, you misunderstood her; or, perhaps, she misunderstood you; or I may be misunderstanding it altogether; so we'd better not talk any more about it. What price

did you say you were going to give for the drugget in Mr. Gibson's dining-room, sister?"

So Miss Browning and Molly went on till evening, each chafed and angry with the other. They wished each other good-night, going through the usual forms in the coolest manner possible. Molly went up to her little bedroom, clean and neat as a bedroom could be, with draperies of small delicate patchwork — bed-curtains, window-curtains, and counterpane; a japanned toilette-table, full of little boxes, with a small looking-glass affixed to it, that distorted every face that was so unwise as to look in it. This room had been to the child one of the most dainty and luxurious places ever seen, in comparison with her own bare, white-dimity bedroom; and now she was sleeping in it, as a guest, and all the quaint adornments she had once peeped at as a great favour, as they were carefully wrapped up in cap-paper, were set out for her use. And yet how little she had deserved this hospitable care; how impertinent she had been; how cross she had felt ever since! She was crying tears of penitence and youthful misery when there came a low tap to the door. Molly opened it, and there stood Miss Browning, in a wonderful erection of a nightcap, and scantily attired in a coloured calico jacket over her scrimpy and short white petticoat.

"I was afraid you were asleep, child," said she, coming in and shutting the door. "But I wanted to say to you we've got wrong to-day, somehow; and I think it was perhaps my doing. It's as well Phœbe shouldn't know, for she thinks me perfect; and when there's only two of us, we get along better if one of us thinks the other can do no wrong. But I rather

think I was a little cross. We'll not say any more about it, Molly; only we'll go to sleep friends, — and friends we'll always be, child, won't we? Now give me a kiss, and don't cry and swell your eyes up; — and put out your candle carefully."

"I was wrong — it was my fault," said Molly, kissing her.

"Fiddlestick-ends! Don't contradict me! I say it was my fault, and I won't hear another word about it."

The next day Molly went with Miss Browning to see the changes going on in her father's house. To her they were but dismal improvements. The faint grey of the dining-room walls, which had harmonized well enough with the deep crimson of the moreen curtains, and which when well cleaned looked thinly coated rather than dirty, was now exchanged for a pink salmon-colour of a very glowing hue; and the new curtains were of that pale sea-green just coming into fashion. "Very bright and pretty," Miss Browning called it; and in the first renewing of their love Molly could not bear to contradict her. She could only hope that the green and brown drugget would tone down the brightness and prettiness. There was scaffolding here, scaffolding there, and Betty scolding everywhere.

"Come up now, and see your papa's bedroom. He's sleeping upstairs in yours, that everything may be done up afresh in his."

Molly could just remember, in faint clear lines of distinctness, the being taken into this very room to bid farewell to her dying mother. She could see the white linen, the white muslin, surrounding the pale,

wan wistful face, with the large, longing eyes, yearning for one more touch of the little soft warm child, whom she was too feeble to clasp in her arms, already growing numb in death. Many a time when Molly had been in this room since that sad day, had she seen in vivid fancy that same wan wistful face lying on the pillow, the outline of the form beneath the clothes; and the girl had not shrunk from such visions, but rather cherished them, as preserving to her the remembrance of her mother's outward semblance. Her eyes were full of tears, as she followed Miss Browning into this room to see it under its new aspect. Nearly everything was changed — the position of the bed and the colour of the furniture; there was a grand toilette-table now, with a glass upon it, instead of the primitive substitute of the top of a chest of drawers, with a mirror above upon the wall, sloping downwards; these latter things had served her mother during her short married life.

"You see we must have all in order for a lady who has passed so much of her time in the countess's mansion," said Miss Browning, who was now quite reconciled to the marriage, thanks to the pleasant employment of furnishing that had devolved upon her in consequence. "Cromer, the upholsterer, wanted to persuade me to have a sofa and a writing-table. These men will say anything is the fashion, if they want to sell an article. I said, 'No, no, Cromer: bedrooms are for sleeping in, and sitting-rooms are for sitting in. Keep everything to its right purpose, and don't try and delude me into nonsense.' Why, my mother would have given us a fine scolding if she had ever caught us in our bedrooms in the daytime. We kept our out-

door things in a closet downstairs; and there was a very tidy place for washing our hands, which is as much as one wants in the daytime. Stuffing up a bedroom with sofas and tables! I never heard of such a thing. Besides, a hundred pounds won't last for ever. I sha'n't be able to do anything for your room, Molly!"

"I'm right down glad of it," said Molly. "Nearly everything in it was what mamma had when she lived with my great-uncle. I wouldn't have had it changed for the world; I am so fond of it."

"Well, there's no danger of it, now the money is run out. By the way, Molly, who's to buy you a bridesmaid's dress?"

"I don't know," said Molly; "I suppose I am to be a bridesmaid; but no one has spoken to me about my dress."

"Then I shall ask your papa."

"Please, don't. He must have to spend a great deal of money just now. Besides, I would rather not be at the wedding, if they'll let me stay away."

"Nonsense, child. Why, all the town would be talking of it. You must go, and you must be well dressed, for your father's sake."

But Mr. Gibson had thought of Molly's dress, although he had said nothing about it to her. He had commissioned his future wife to get her what was requisite; and presently a very smart dressmaker came over from the county-town to try on a dress, which was both so simple and so elegant as at once to charm Molly. When it came home all ready to put on, Molly had a private dressing-up for the Miss Brownings' benefit; and she was almost startled when she look

doorway to greet her father. She took him as a young lady at once, and it time she had met with the kind of be- complimentary, half flirting — which it necessary to assume with every ve-and-twenty. Mr. Preston was very new it. He was a fair man, with nd whiskers; grey, roving, well- shes darker than his hair; and a and supple by the athletic ex- llence was famous, and which on into much higher society itled to enter. He was a d a shot, that any house ags on the 12th or the r a guest. He taught ards on a wet day, or went ous earnest when required. He private theatrical plays off by heart, able in arranging impromptu charades He had his own private reasons for up a flirtation with Molly just at this used himself so much with the widow ame to Ashcombe, that he fancied that m, standing by her less polished, less dle-aged husband, might be too much be agreeable. Besides, he had really n for some one else; some one who ; and that passion it was necessary for So that, altogether, he had resolved, little Gibson-girl" (as he called her) ive than she was, to devote himself to sixteen hours.

into the glass, and saw the improvement in her appearance. "I wonder if I'm pretty," thought she. "I almost think I am — in this kind of dress I mean, of course. Betty would say, 'fine feathers make fine birds.'"

When she went downstairs in her bridal attire, and with shy blushes presented herself for inspection, she was greeted with a burst of admiration.

"Well, upon my word! I shouldn't have known you." ("Fine feathers," thought Molly, and checked her rising vanity.)

"You are really beautiful — isn't she, sister?" said Miss Phœbe. "Why, my dear, if you were always dressed, you would be prettier than your dear mamma, whom we always reckoned so very personable."

"You're not a bit like her. You favour your father, and white always sets off a brown complexion."

"But isn't she beautiful?" persevered Miss Phœbe.

"Well! and if she is, Providence made her, and not she herself. Besides, the dressmaker must go shares. What a fine India muslin it is! it'll have cost a pretty penny!"

Mr. Gibson and Molly drove over to Ashcombe, the night before the wedding, in the one yellow post-chaise that Hollingford possessed. They were to be Mr. Preston's, or, rather, my lord's, guests at the Manor-house. The Manor-house came up to its name, and delighted Molly at first sight. It was built of stone, had many gables and mullioned windows, and was covered over with Virginian creeper and late-blowing roses. Molly did not know Mr. Preston, who

stood in the doorway to greet her father. She took standing with him as a young lady at once, and it was the first time she had met with the kind of behaviour — half complimentary, half flirting — which some men think it necessary to assume with every woman under five-and-twenty. Mr. Preston was very handsome, and knew it. He was a fair man, with light-brown hair and whiskers; grey, roving, well-shaped eyes, with lashes darker than his hair; and a figure rendered easy and supple by the athletic exercises in which his excellence was famous, and which had procured him admission into much higher society than he was otherwise entitled to enter. He was a capital cricketer; was so good a shot, that any house desirous of reputation for its bags on the 12th or the 1st, was glad to have him for a guest. He taught young ladies to play billiards on a wet day, or went in for the game in serious earnest when required. He knew half the private theatrical plays off by heart, and was invaluable in arranging impromptu charades and tableaux. He had his own private reasons for wishing to get up a flirtation with Molly just at this time; he had amused himself so much with the widow when she first came to Ashcombe, that he fancied that the sight of him, standing by her less polished, less handsome, middle-aged husband, might be too much of a contrast to be agreeable. Besides, he had really a strong passion for some one else; some one who would be absent; and that passion it was necessary for him to conceal. So that, altogether, he had resolved, even had "the little Gibson-girl" (as he called her) been less attractive than she was, to devote himself to her for the next sixteen hours.

They were taken by their host into a wainscoted parlour, where a wood fire crackled and burnt, and the crimson curtains shut out the waning day and the outer chill. Here the table was laid for dinner; snowy table linen, bright silver, clear sparkling glass, wine and an autumnal dessert on the side-board. Yet Mr. Preston kept apologizing to Molly for the rudeness of his bachelor home, for the smallness of the room, the great dining-room being already appropriated by his housekeeper, in preparation for the morrow's breakfast. And then he rang for a servant to show Molly to her room. She was taken into a most comfortable chamber; a wood fire on the hearth, candles lighted on the toilette-table, dark woollen curtains surrounding a snow-white bed, great vases of china standing here and there.

"This is my Lady Harriet's room when her ladyship comes to the Manor-house with my lord the earl," said the housemaid, striking out thousands of brilliant sparks by a well-directed blow at a smouldering log. "Shall I help you to dress, miss? I always helps her ladyship."

Molly, quite aware of the fact that she had but her white muslin gown for the wedding besides that she had on, dismissed the good woman, and was thankful to be left to herself.

"Dinner" was it called? Why, it was nearly eight o'clock; and preparations for bed seemed a more natural employment than dressing at this hour of night. All the dressing she could manage was the placing of a red damask rose or two in the band of her grey stuff gown, there standing a great nosegay of choice autumnal flowers on the toilette-table. She did try the

effect of another crimson rose in her black hair, just above her ear; it was very pretty, but too coquettish, and so she put it back again. The dark oak-panels and wainscoting of the whole house seemed to glow in warm light; there were so many fires in different rooms, in the hall, and even one on the landing of the staircase. Mr. Preston must have heard her step, for he met her in the hall, and led her into a small drawing-room, with close folding-doors on one side, opening into the larger drawing-room, as he told her. This room into which she entered reminded her a little of Hamley — yellow-satin upholstery of seventy or a hundred years ago, all delicately kept and scrupulously clean; great Indian cabinets, and china jars, emitting spicy odours; a large blazing fire, before which her father stood in his morning dress, grave and thoughtful, as he had been all day.

"This room is that which Lady Harriet uses when she comes here with her father for a day or two," said Mr. Preston. And Molly tried to save her father by being ready to talk herself.

"Does she often come here?"

"Not often. But I fancy she likes being here when she does. Perhaps she finds it an agreeable change after the more formal life she leads at the Towers."

"I should think it was a very pleasant house to stay at," said Molly, remembering the look of warm comfort that pervaded it. But a little to her dismay Mr. Preston seemed to take it as a compliment to himself.

"I was afraid a young lady like you might per

ceive all the incongruities of a bachelor's home. I am very much obliged to you, Miss Gibson. In general I live pretty much in the room in which we shall dine; and I have a sort of agent's office in which I keep books and papers, and receive callers on business."

Then they went in to dinner. Molly thought everything that was served was delicious, and cooked to the point of perfection; but they did not seem to satisfy Mr. Preston, who apologized to his guests several times for the bad cooking of this dish, or the omission of a particular sauce to that; always referring to bachelor's housekeeping, bachelor's this and bachelor's that, till Molly grew quite impatient at the word. Her father's depression, which was still continuing and rendering him very silent, made her uneasy; yet she wished to conceal it from Mr. Preston; and so she talked away, trying to obviate the sort of personal bearing which their host would give to everything. She did not know when to leave the gentlemen, but her father made a sign to her; and she was conducted back to the yellow drawing-room by Mr. Preston, who made many apologies for leaving her there alone. She enjoyed herself extremely, however, feeling at liberty to prowl about, and examine all the curiosities the room contained. Among other things was a Louis Quinze cabinet with lovely miniatures in enamel let into the fine woodwork. She carried a candle to it, and was looking intently at these faces when her father and Mr. Preston came in. Her father still looked careworn and anxious; he came up and patted her on the back, looked at what she was looking at, and then went off to silence and the fire. Mr. Preston took the

candle out of her hand, and threw himself into her interests with an air of ready gallantry.

"That is said to be Mademoiselle de St. Quentin, a great beauty at the French Court. This is Madame du Barri. Do you see any likeness in Mademoiselle de St. Quentin to any one you know?" He had lowered his voice a little as he asked this question.

"No!" said Molly, looking at it again. "I never saw any one half so beautiful."

"But don't you see a likeness — in the eyes particularly?" he asked again, with some impatience.

Molly tried hard to find out a resemblance, and was again unsuccessful.

"It constantly reminds me of — of Miss Kirkpatrick."

"Does it?" said Molly, eagerly. "Oh! I am so glad — I've never seen her, so of course I couldn't find out the likeness. You know her then, do you? Please tell me all about her."

He hesitated a moment before speaking. He smiled a little before replying.

"She's very beautiful; that of course is understood when I say that this miniature does not come up to her for beauty."

"And besides? — Go on, please."

"What do you mean by 'besides'?"

"Oh! I suppose she's very clever and accomplished?"

That was not in the least what Molly wanted to ask; but it was difficult to word the vague vastness of her unspoken inquiry.

"She is clever naturally; she has picked up accomplishments. But she has such a charm about her

one forgets what she herself is in the halo that surrounds her. You ask me all this, Miss Gibson, and I answer truthfully; or else I should not entertain one young lady with my enthusiastic praises of another."

"I don't see why not," said Molly. "Besides, if you wouldn't do it in general, I think you ought to do it in my case; for you, perhaps, don't know, but she is coming to live with us when she leaves school, and we are very nearly the same age; so it will be almost like having a sister."

"She is to live with you, is she?" said Mr. Preston, to whom this intelligence was news. "And when is she to leave school? I thought she would surely have been at this wedding; but I was told she was not to come. When is she to leave school?"

"I think it is to be at Easter. You know she's at Boulogne, and it's a long journey for her to come alone; or else papa wished for her to be at the marriage very much indeed."

"And her mother prevented it? — I understand."

"No, it wasn't her mother; it was the French schoolmistress, who didn't think it desirable."

"It comes to pretty much the same thing. And she's to return and live with you after Easter?"

"I believe so. Is she a grave or a merry person?"

"Never very grave, as far as I have seen of her. Sparkling would be the word for her, I think. Do you ever write to her? If you do, pray remember me to her, and tell her how we have been talking about her — you and I."

"I never write to her," said Molly, rather shortly.

Tea came in; and after that they all went to bed.

Molly heard her father exclaim at the fire in his bed-room, and Mr. Preston's reply —

"I pique myself on my keen relish for all creature comforts, and also on my power of doing without them, if need be. My lord's woods are ample, and I indulge myself with a fire in my bed-room for nine months in the year; yet I could travel in Iceland without wincing from the cold."

CHAPTER XIV.

Molly Finds Herself Patronized.

THE wedding went off much as such affairs do. Lord Cumnor and Lady Harriet drove over from the Towers, so the hour for the ceremony was as late as possible. Lord Cumnor came over to officiate as the bride's father, and was in more open glee than either bride or bridegroom, or any one else. Lady Harriet came as a sort of amateur bridesmaid, to "share Molly's duties," as she called it. They went from the Manor-house in two carriages to the church in the park, Mr. Preston and Mr. Gibson in one, and Molly, to her dismay, shut up with Lord Cumnor and Lady Harriet in the other. Lady Harriet's gown of white muslin had seen one or two garden-parties, and was not in the freshest order; it had been rather a freak of the young lady's at the last moment. She was very merry, and very much inclined to talk to Molly, by way of finding out what sort of a little personage Clare was to have for her future daughter. She began: —

"We mustn't crush this pretty muslin dress of yours. Put it over papa's knee; he doesn't mind it in the least."

"What, my dear, a white dress! — no, to be sure not. I rather like it. Besides, going to a wedding, who minds anything? It would be different if we were going to a funeral."

Molly conscientiously strove to find out the meaning

of this speech; but before she had done so, Lady Harriet spoke again, going to the point, as she always piqued herself on doing:

"I daresay it's something of a trial to you, this second marriage of your father's; but you'll find Clare the most amiable of women. She always let me have my own way, and I've no doubt she'll let you have yours."

"I mean to try and like her," said Molly, in a low voice, trying hard to keep down the tears that would keep rising to her eyes this morning. "I've seen very little of her yet."

"Why, it's the very best thing for you that could have happened, my dear," said Lord Cumnor. "You're growing up into a young lady — and a very pretty young lady, too, if you'll allow an old man to say so — and who so proper as your father's wife to bring you out, and show you off, and take you to balls, and that kind of thing? I always said this match that is going to come off to-day was the most suitable thing I ever knew; and it's even a better thing for you than for the people themselves."

"Poor child!" said Lady Harriet, who had caught a sight of Molly's troubled face, "the thought of balls is too much for her just now; but you'll like having Cynthia Kirkpatrick for a companion, sha'n't you, dear?"

"Very much," said Molly, cheering up a little. "Do you know her?"

"Oh, I've seen her over and over again when she was a little girl, and once or twice since. She's the prettiest creature that you ever saw; and with eyes that mean mischief, if I'm not mistaken. But Clare

kept her spirit under pretty well when she was staying with us, — afraid of her being troublesome, I fancy."

Before Molly could shape her next question, they were at the church; and she and Lady Harriet went into a pew near the door to wait for the bride, in whose train they were to proceed to the altar. The earl drove on alone to fetch her from her own house, not a quarter of a mile distant. It was pleasant to her to be led to the hymeneal altar by a belted earl, and pleasant to have his daughter as a volunteer bridesmaid. Mrs. Kirkpatrick in this flush of small gratifications, and on the brink of matrimony with a man whom she liked, and who would be bound to support her without any exertion of her own, looked beamingly happy and handsome. A little cloud came over her face at the sight of Mr. Preston, — the sweet perpetuity of her smile was rather disturbed as he followed in Mr. Gibson's wake. But his face never changed; he bowed to her gravely, and then seemed absorbed in the service. Ten minutes, and all was over. The bride and bridegroom were driving together to the Manor-house, Mr. Preston was walking thither by a short cut, and Molly was again in the carriage with my lord, rubbing his hands and chuckling, and Lady Harriet, trying to be kind and consolatory, when her silence would have been the best comfort.

Molly found out, to her dismay, that the plan was for her to return with Lord Cumnor and Lady Harriet when they went back to the Towers in the evening. In the meantime Lord Cumnor had business to do with Mr. Preston, and after the happy couple had driven off on their week's holiday tour, she was to be left alone with the formidable Lady Harriet. When they were

by themselves after all the others had been thus disposed of, Lady Harriet sate still over the drawing-room fire, holding a screen between it and her face, but gazing intently at Molly for a minute or two. Molly was fully conscious of this prolonged look, and was trying to get up her courage to return the stare, when Lady Harriet suddenly said, —

"I like you; — you are a little wild creature, and I want to tame you. Come here, and sit on this stool by me. What is your name? or what do they call you? — as North-country people would express it."

"Molly Gibson. My real name is Mary."

"Molly is a nice, soft-sounding name. People in the last century weren't afraid of homely names; now we are all so smart and fine: no more 'Lady Bettys' now. I almost wonder they haven't re-christened all the worsted and knitting-cotton that bears her name. Fancy Lady Constantia's cotton, or Lady Anna-Maria's worsted."

"I didn't know there was a Lady Betty's cotton," said Molly.

"That proves you don't do fancy-work! You'll find Clare will set you to it, though. She used to set me at piece after piece: knights kneeling to ladies; impossible flowers. But I must do her the justice to add that when I got tired of them she finished them herself. I wonder how you'll get on together?"

"So do I!" sighed out Molly, under her breath.

"I used to think I managed her, till one day an uncomfortable suspicion arose that all the time she had been managing me. Still it's easy work to let oneself be managed; at any rate till one wakens up to the

consciousness of the process, and then it may become amusing, if one takes it in that light."

"I should hate to be managed," said Molly, indignantly. "I'll try and do what she wishes for papa's sake, if she'll only tell me outright; but I should dislike to be trapped into anything."

"Now I," said Lady Harriet, "am too lazy to avoid traps; and I rather like to remark the cleverness with which they're set. But then, of course, I know that if I choose to exert myself, I can break through the withes of green flax with which they try to bind me. Now, perhaps, you won't be able."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," said Molly.

"Oh, well — never mind; I daresay it's as well for you that you shouldn't. The moral of all I have been saying is, 'Be a good girl, and suffer yourself to be led, and you'll find your new stepmother the sweetest creature imaginable.' You'll get on capitally with her, I make no doubt. How you'll get on with her daughter is another affair; but I daresay very well. Now we'll ring for tea; for I suppose that heavy breakfast is to stand for our lunch."

Mr. Preston came into the room just at this time, and Molly was a little surprised at Lady Harriet's cool manner of dismissing him, remembering as she did how Mr. Preston had implied his intimacy with her ladyship the evening before at dinner-time.

"I cannot bear that sort of person," said Lady Harriet, almost before he was out of hearing; "giving himself airs of gallantry towards one to whom his simple respect is all his duty. I can talk to one of my father's labourers with pleasure, while with a man

like that underbred fop I am all over thorns and nettles. What is it the Irish call that style of creature? They've some capital word for it, I know. What is it?"

"I don't know — I never heard it," said Molly, a little ashamed of her ignorance.

"Oh! that shows you've never read Miss Edgeworth's tales; — now, have you? If you had, you'd have recollected that there was such a word, even if you didn't remember what it was. If you've never read those stories, they would be just the thing to beguile your solitude — vastly improving and moral, and yet quite sufficiently interesting. I'll lend them to you while you're all alone."

"I'm not alone. I'm not at home, but on a visit to Miss Brownings."

"Then I'll bring them to you. I know the Miss Brownings; they used to come regularly on the school-day to the Towers. Pecksy and Flapsy I used to call them. I like the Miss Brownings; one gets enough of respect from them at any rate; and I've always wanted to see the kind of *ménage* of such people. I'll bring you a whole pile of Miss Edgeworth's stories, my dear."

Molly sate quite silent for a minute or two; then she mustered up courage to speak out what was in her mind.

"Your ladyship" (the title was the firstfruits of the lesson, as Molly took it, on paying due respect) — "your ladyship keeps speaking of the sort of — the class of people to which I belong as if it was a kind of strange animal you were talking about; yet you talk so openly to me that ——"

"Well; go on — I like to hear you."

Still silence.

"You think me in your heart a little impertinent — now, don't you?" said Lady Harriet, almost kindly.

Molly held her peace for two or three moments; then she lifted her beautiful, honest eyes to Lady Harriet's face, and said, —

"Yes! — a little. But I think you a great many other things."

"We'll leave the 'other things' for the present. Don't you see, little one, I talk after my kind, just as you talk after your kind. It's only on the surface with both of us. Why, I daresay some of your good Hollingford ladies talk of the poor people in a manner which they would consider as impertinent in their turn, if they could hear it. But I ought to be more considerate when I remember how often my blood has boiled at the modes of speech and behaviour of one of my aunts, mamma's sister, Lady —— No! I won't name names. Any one who earns his livelihood by any exercise of head or hands, from professional people and rich merchants down to labourers, she calls 'persons.' She would never in her most slip-slop talk accord them even the conventional title of 'gentlemen;' and the way in which she takes possession of human beings, 'my woman,' 'my people,' — but, after all, it is only a way of speaking. I ought not to have used it to you; but somehow I separate you from all these Hollingford people."

"But why?" persevered Molly. "I'm one of them."

"Yes, you are. But — now don't reprove me again for impertinence — most of them are so unnatural in their exaggerated respect and admiration when they come up to the Towers, and put on so much pretence

by way of fine manners, that they only make themselves objects of ridicule. You at least are simple and truthful, and that's why I separate you in my own mind from them, and have talked unconsciously to you as I would —— well! now here's another piece of impertinence — as I would to my equal — in rank, I mean; for I don't set myself up in solid things as any better than my neighbours. Here's tea, however, come in time to stop me from growing too humble."

It was a very pleasant little tea in the fading September twilight.

Just as it was ended, in came Mr. Preston again: —

"Lady Harriet, will you allow me the pleasure of showing you some alterations I have made in the flower-garden — in which I have tried to consult your taste — before it grows dark?"

"Thank you, Mr. Preston. I will ride over with papa some day, and we will see if we approve of them."

Mr. Preston's brow flushed. But he affected not to perceive Lady Harriet's haughtiness, and, turning to Molly, he said, —

"Will not you come out, Miss Gibson, and see something of the gardens? You haven't been out at all, I think, excepting to church."

Molly did not like the idea of going out for a tête-à-tête walk with Mr. Preston; yet she pined for a little fresh air, would have liked to have seen the gardens, and have looked at the Manor-house from different aspects; and, besides this, much as she recoiled from Mr. Preston, she felt sorry for him under the repulse he had just received.

While she was hesitating, and slowly tending towards consent, Lady Harriet spoke, —

"I cannot spare Miss Gibson. If she would like to see the place, I will bring her over some day myself."

When he had left room, Lady Harriet said, —

"I daresay it's my own lazy selfishness has kept you indoors all day against your will. But, at any rate, you are not to go out walking with that man. I've an instinctive aversion to him; not entirely instinctive either; it has some foundation in fact; and I desire you don't allow him ever to get intimate with you. He's a very clever land-agent, and does his duty by papa, and I don't choose to be taken up for libel; but remember what I say!"

Then the carriage came round, and after numberless last words from the earl — who appeared to have put off every possible direction to the moment when he stood, like an awkward Mercury, balancing himself on the step of the carriage — they drove back to the Towers.

"Would you rather come in and dine with us — we should send you home, of course — or go home straight?" asked Lady Harriet of Molly. She and her father had both been sleeping till they drew up at the bottom of the flight of steps.

"Tell the truth, now and evermore. Truth is generally amusing, if it's nothing else!"

"I would rather go back to Miss Brownings' at once, please," said Molly, with a nightmare-like recollection of the last, the only evening she had spent at the Towers.

Lord Cumnor was standing on the steps, waiting to

hand his daughter out of the carriage. Lady Harriet stopped to kiss Molly on the forehead, and to say, —

"I shall come some day soon, and bring you a load of Miss Edgeworth's tales, and make further acquaintance with Pecksy and Flapsy."

"No, don't, please," said Molly, taking hold of her, to detain her. "You must not come — indeed you must not."

"Why not?"

"Because I would rather not — because I think that I ought not to have any one coming to see me who laughs at the friends I am staying with, and calls them names." Molly's heart beat very fast, but she meant every word that she said.

"My dear little woman!" said Lady Harriet, bending over her and speaking quite gravely. "I'm very sorry to have called them names — very, very sorry to have hurt you. If I promise you to be respectful to them in word and in deed — and in very thought, if I can — you'll let me then, won't you?"

Molly hesitated. "I'd better go home at once; I shall only say wrong things — and there's Lord Cumnor waiting all this time."

"Let him alone; he's very well amused hearing all the news of the day from Brown. Then I shall come — under promise?"

So Molly drove off in solitary grandeur; and Miss Brownings' knocker was loosened on its venerable hinges by the never-ending peal of Lord Cumnor's footman.

They were full of welcome, full of curiosity. All through the long day they had been missing their bright young visitor, and three or four times in every

hour they had been wondering and settling what everybody was doing at that exact minute. What had become of Molly during all the afternoon, had been a great perplexity to them; and they were very much oppressed with a sense of the great honour she had received in being allowed to spend so many hours alone with Lady Harriet. They were, indeed, more excited by this one fact than by all the details of the wedding, most of which they had known of beforehand, and talked over with much perseverance during the day. Molly began to feel as if there was some foundation for Lady Harriet's inclination to ridicule the worship paid by the good people of Hollingford to their liege lord, and to wonder with what tokens of reverence they would receive Lady Harriet if she came to pay her promised visit. She had never thought of concealing the probability of this call until this evening; but now she felt as if it would be better not to speak of the chance, as she was not at all sure that the promise would be fulfilled.

Before Lady Harriet's call was paid, Molly received another visit.

Roger Hamley came riding over one day with a note from his mother, and a wasps'-nest as a present from himself. Molly heard his powerful voice come sounding up the little staircase, as he asked if Miss Gibson was at home from the servant-maid at the door; and she was half amused and half annoyed as she thought how this call of his would give colour to Miss Browning's fancies. "I would rather never be married at all," thought she, "than marry an ugly man, — and dear good Mr. Roger is really ugly; I don't think one could even call him plain." Yet Miss Brownings, who

did not look upon young men as if their natural costume was a helmet and a suit of armour, thought Mr. Roger Hamley a very personable young fellow, as he came into the room, his face flushed with exercise, his white teeth showing pleasantly in the courteous bow and smile he gave to all around. He knew the Miss Brownings slightly, and talked pleasantly to them while Molly read Mrs. Hamley's little missive of sympathy and good wishes relating to the wedding; then he turned to her, and though Miss Brownings listened with all their ears, they could not find out anything remarkable either in the words he said or the tone in which they were spoken.

"I've brought you the wasps'-nest I promised you, Miss Gibson. There has been no lack of such things this year; we've taken seventy-four on my father's land alone; and one of the labourers, a poor fellow who ekes out his wages by bee-keeping, has had a sad misfortune — the wasps have turned the bees out of his seven hives, taken possession, and eaten up the honey."

"What greedy little vermin!" said Miss Browning.

Molly saw Roger's eyes twinkle at the misapplication of the word; but though he had a strong sense of humour, it never appeared to diminish his respect for the people who amused him.

"I'm sure they deserve fire and brimstone more than the poor dear innocent bees," said Miss Phœbe. "And then it seems so ungrateful of mankind, who are going to feast on the honey!" She sighed over the thought, as if it was too much for her.

While Molly finished reading her note, he explained its contents to Miss Browning.

"My brother and I are going with my father to a

agricultural meeting at Canonbury on Thursday, and my mother desired me to say to you how very much obliged she should be if you would spare her Miss Gibson for the day. She was very anxious to ask for the pleasure of your company, too, but she really is so poorly that we persuaded her to be content with Miss Gibson, as she wouldn't scruple leaving a young lady to amuse herself, which she would be unwilling to do if you and your sister were there."

"I'm sure she's very kind; very. Nothing would have given us more pleasure," said Miss Browning, drawing herself up in gratified dignity. "Oh, yes, we quite understand, Mr. Roger; and we fully recognize Mrs. Hamley's kind intention. We will take the will for the deed, as the common people express it. I believe that there was an intermarriage between the Brownings and the Hamleys, a generation or two ago."

"I daresay there was," said Roger. "My mother is very delicate, and obliged to humour her health, which has made her keep aloof from society."

"Then I may go?" said Molly, sparkling with the idea of seeing her dear Mrs. Hamley again, yet afraid of appearing too desirous of leaving her kind old friends.

"To be sure, my dear. Write a pretty note, and tell Mrs. Hamley how much obliged to her we are for thinking of us."

"I'm afraid I can't wait for a note," said Roger. "I must take a message instead, for I have to meet my father at one o'clock, and it's close upon it now."

When he was gone, Molly felt so light-hearted at the thoughts of Thursday that she could hardly attend to what the Miss Brownings were saying. One was

talking about the pretty muslin gown which Molly had sent to the wash only that morning, and contriving how it could be had back again in time for her to wear; and the other, Miss Phœbe, totally inattentive to her sister's speaking for a wonder, was piping out a separate strain of her own, and singing Roger Hamley's praises.

"Such a fine-looking young man, and so courteous and affable. Like the young men of our youth now, is he not, sister? And yet they all say Mr. Osborne is the handsomest. What do you think, child?"

"I've never seen Mr. Osborne," said Molly, blushing, and hating herself for doing so. Why was it? She had never seen him as she said. It was only that her fancy had dwelt on him so much.

He was gone — all the gentlemen were gone before the carriage, which came to fetch Molly on Thursday, reached Hamley Hall. But Molly was almost glad, she was so much afraid of being disappointed. Besides, she had her dear Mrs. Hamley the more to herself; the quiet sit in the morning-room, talking poetry and romance; the midday saunter into the garden, brilliant with autumnal flowers and glittering dew-drops on the gossamer webs that stretched from scarlet to blue, and thence to purple and yellow petals. As they were sitting at lunch, a strange man's voice and step were heard in the hall; the door was opened, and a young man came in, who could be no other than Osborne. He was beautiful and languid-looking, almost as frail in appearance as his mother, whom he strongly resembled. This seeming delicacy made him appear older than he was. He was dressed to perfection, and yet with easy carelessness. He came up to his mother, and stood by her, holding her hand

while his eyes sought Molly, not boldly or impertinently, but as if appraising her critically.

"Yes! I'm back again. Bullocks, I find, are not in my line. I only disappointed my father in not being able to appreciate their merits, and, I'm afraid, I didn't care to learn. And the smell was insufferable on such a hot day."

"My dear boy, don't make apologies to me; keep them for your father. I'm only too glad to have you back. Miss Gibson, this tall fellow is my son Osborne as I daresay you have guessed. Osborne — Miss Gibson. Now, what will you have?"

He looked round the table as he sate down. "Nothing here," said he. "Isn't there some cold game-pie? I'll ring for that."

Molly was trying to reconcile the ideal with the real. The ideal was agile, yet powerful, with Greek features and an eagle-eye, capable of enduring long fasting, and indifferent as to what he ate. The real was almost effeminate in movement, though not in figure; he had the Greek features, but his blue eyes had a cold, weary expression in them. He was dainty in eating, and had anything but an Homeric appetite. However, Molly's hero was not to eat more than Ivanhoe, when he was Friar Tuck's guest; and, after all, with a little alteration, she began to think Mr. Osborne Hamley might turn out a poetical, if not a chivalrous hero. He was extremely attentive to his mother, which pleased Molly, and, in return, Mrs. Hamley seemed charmed with him to such a degree that Molly once or twice fancied that mother and son would have been happier in her absence. Yet, again, it struck on the

shrewd, if simple girl, that Osborne was mentally squinting at her in the conversation which was directed to his mother. There were little turns and 'fioriture' of speech which Molly could not help feeling were graceful antics of language not common in the simple daily intercourse between mother and son. But it was flattering rather than otherwise to perceive that a very fine young man, who was a poet to boot, should think it worth while to talk on the tight rope for her benefit. And before the afternoon was ended, without there having been any direct conversation between Osborne and Molly, she had reinstated him on his throne in her imagination; indeed, she had almost felt herself disloyal to her dear Mrs. Hamley when, in the first hour after her introduction, she had questioned his claims on his mother's idolatry. His beauty came out more and more as he became animated in some discussion with her; and all his attitudes, if a little studied, were graceful in the extreme. Before Molly left, the squire and Roger returned from Canonbury.

"Osborne here!" said the squire, red and panting. "Why the deuce couldn't you tell us you were coming home? I looked about for you everywhere, just as we were going into the ordinary. I wanted to introduce you to Grantley, and Fox, and Lord Forrest — men from the other side of the county, whom you ought to know; and Roger there missed above half his dinner hunting about for you; and all the time you'd stole away, and were quietly sitting here with the women. I wish you'd let me know the next time you make off. I've lost half my pleasure in looking at as fine a lot of cattle as I ever saw, with thinking you might be having one of your old attacks of faintness."

"I should have had one, I think, if I'd stayed longer in that atmosphere. But I'm sorry if I've caused you anxiety."

"Well! well!" said the squire, somewhat mollified. "And Roger, too, — there I've been sending him here and sending him there all the afternoon."

"I didn't mind it, sir. I was only sorry you were so uneasy. I thought Osborne had gone home, for I knew it wasn't much in his way," said Roger.

Molly intercepted a glance between the two brothers — a look of true confidence and love, which suddenly made her like them both under the aspect of relationship — new to her observation.

Roger came up to her, and sat down by her.

"Well, and how are you getting on with Huber; don't you find him very interesting?"

"I'm afraid," said Molly, penitently, "I haven't read much. Miss Brownings like me to talk; and, besides, there is so much to do at home before papa comes back; and Miss Browning doesn't like me to go without her. I know it sounds nothing, but it does take up a great deal of time."

"When is your father coming back?"

"Next Tuesday, I believe. He cannot stay long away."

"I shall ride over and pay my respects to Mrs. Gibson," said he. "I shall come as soon as I may. Your father has been a very kind friend to me ever since I was a boy. And when I come, I shall expect my pupil to have been very diligent," he concluded, smiling his kind, pleasant smile at idle Molly.

Then the carriage came round, and she had the long solitary drive back to Miss Brownings'. It was dark out of doors when she got there; but Miss Phœbe was standing on the stairs, with a lighted candle in her hand, peering into the darkness to see Molly come in.

"Oh, Molly! I thought you'd never come back. Such a piece of news! Sister has gone to bed; she's had a headache — with the excitement, I think; but she says it's new bread. Come upstairs softly, my dear, and I'll tell you what it is! Who do you think has been here, — drinking tea with us, too, in the most condescending manner?"

"Lady Harriet?" said Molly suddenly enlightened by the word 'condescending.'

"Yes. Why, how did you guess it? But, after all, her call, at any rate in the first instance, was upon you. Oh, dear Molly! if you're not in a hurry to go to bed, let me sit down quietly and tell you all about it; for my heart jumps into my mouth still when I think of how I was caught. She — that is, her ladyship — left the carriage at 'The George,' and took to her feet to go shopping — just as you or I may have done many a time in our lives. And sister was taking her forty winks; and I was sitting with my gown up above my knees and my feet on the fender, pulling out my grand-mother's lace which I'd been washing. The worst has yet to be told. I'd taken off my cap, for I thought it was getting dusk and no one would come, and there was I in my black silk skull-cap, when Nancy put her head in, and whispered, 'There's a lady downstairs — a real grand one, by her talk

and in there came my Lady Harriet, so sweet and pretty in her ways, it was some time before I forgot I had never a cap on. Sister never wakened; or never roused up, so to say. She says she thought it was Nancy bringing in the tea when she heard some one moving; for her ladyship, as soon as she saw the state of the case, came and knelt down on the rug by me, and begged my pardon so prettily for having followed Nancy upstairs without waiting for permission; and was so taken by my old lace, and wanted to know how I washed it, and where you were, and when you'd be back, and when the happy couple would be back: till sister wakened — she's always a little bit put out, you know, when she first wakens from her afternoon nap, — and, without turning her head to see who it was, she said, quite sharp, — 'Buzz, buzz, buzz! When will you learn that whispering is more fidgeting than talking out loud? I've not been able to sleep at all for the chatter you and Nancy have been keeping up all this time.' You know that was a little fancy of sister's, for she'd been snoring away as naturally as could be. So I went to her, and leant over her, and said in a low voice, —

"'Sister, it's her ladyship and me that has been conversing.'

"'Ladyship here, ladyship there! have you lost your wits, Phœbe, that you talk such nonsense — and in your skull-cap, too!'

"By this time she was sitting up — and, looking round her, she saw Lady Harriet, in her velvets and silks, sitting on our rug, smiling, her bonnet off, and her pretty hair all bright with the blaze of the fire.

My word! sister was up on her feet directly; and she dropped her curtsey, and made her excuses for sleeping, as fast as might be, while I went off to put on my best cap, for sister might well say I was out of my wits to go on chatting to an earl's daughter in an old black silk skull-cap. Black silk, too! when, if I'd only known she was coming, I might have put on my new brown silk, lying idle in my top drawer. And when I came back, sister was ordering tea for her ladyship, — our tea, I mean. So I took my turn at talk, and sister slipped out to put on her Sunday silk. But I don't think we were quite so much at our ease with her ladyship as when I sat pulling out my lace in my skull-cap. And she was quite struck with our tea, and asked where we got it, for she had never tasted any like it before; and I told her we gave only 3*s.* 4*d.* a pound for it, at Johnson's — (sister says I ought to have told her the price of our company-tea, which is 5*s.* a pound, only that was not what we were drinking; for, as ill-luck would have it, we'd none of it in the house) — and she said she would send us some of hers, all the way from Russia or Prussia, or some out-of-the-way place, and we were to compare and see which we liked best; and if we liked hers best, she could get it for us at 3*s.* a pound. And she left her love for you; and, though she was going away, you were not to forget her. Sister thought such a message would set you up too much, and told me she would not be chargeable for the giving it you. 'But,' I said, 'a message is a message, and it's on Molly's own shoulders if she's set up by it. Let us show her an example of humility, sister, though we have been sitting cheek-by-jowl in such company.' So sister humphed, and said

she'd a headache, and went to bed. And now you may tell me your news, my dear."

So Molly told her small events; which, interesting as they might have been at other times to the gossip-loving and sympathetic Miss Phœbe, were rather pale in the stronger light reflected from the visit of an earl's daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

The New Mamma.

On Tuesday afternoon Molly returned home — to the home which was already strange, and what Warwickshire people would call "unked," to her. New paint, new paper, new colours; grim servants dressed in their best, and objecting to every change — from their master's marriage to the new oilcloth in the hall, "which tripped 'em up, and threw 'em down, and was cold to the feet, and smelt just abominable." All these complaints Molly had to listen to, and it was not a cheerful preparation for the reception which she already felt to be so formidable.

The sound of their carriage-wheels was heard at last, and Molly went to the front door to meet them. Her father got out first, and took her hand and held it while he helped his bride to alight. Then he kissed her fondly, and passed her on to his wife; but her veil was so securely (and becomingly) fastened down, that it was some time before Mrs. Gibson could get her lips clear to greet her new daughter. Then there was luggage to be seen about; and both the travellers were occupied in this, while Molly stood by trembling with excitement, unable to help, and only conscious of Betty's rather cross looks, as heavy box after heavy box jammed up the passage.

"Molly, my dear, show — your mamma to her room!"

Mr. Gibson had hesitated, because the question of the name by which Molly was to call her new relation had never occurred to him before. The colour flashed into Molly's face. Was she to call her "mamma?" — the name long appropriated in her mind to some one else — to her own dead mother. The rebellious heart rose against it, but she said nothing. She led the way upstairs, Mrs. Gibson turning round, from time to time, with some fresh direction as to which bag or trunk she needed most. She hardly spoke to Molly till they were both in the newly-furnished bedroom, where a small fire had been lighted by Molly's orders.

"Now, my love, we can embrace each other in peace. O dear, how tired I am!" — (after the embrace had been accomplished). "My spirits are so easily affected with fatigue; but your dear papa has been kindness itself. Dear! what an old-fashioned bed! And what a — But it doesn't signify. By-and-by we'll renovate the house — won't we, my dear? And you'll be my little maid to-night, and help me to arrange a few things, for I'm just worn out with the day's journey."

"I've ordered a sort of tea-dinner to be ready for you," said Molly. "Shall I go and tell them to send it in?"

"I'm not sure if I can go down again to-night. It would be very comfortable to have a little table brought in here, and sit in my dressing-gown by this cheerful fire. But, to be sure, there's your dear papa? I really don't think he would eat anything if I were not there. One must not think about oneself, you know. Yes, I'll come down in a quarter of an hour."

But Mr. Gibson had found a note awaiting him,

with an immediate summons to an old patient, dangerously ill; and, snatching a mouthful of food while his horse was being saddled, he had to resume at once his old habits of attention to his profession above everything.

As soon as Mrs. Gibson found that he was not likely to miss her presence — he had eaten a very tolerable lunch of bread and cold meat in solitude, so her fears about his appetite in her absence were not well founded — she desired to have her meal upstairs in her own room; and poor Molly, not daring to tell the servants of this whim, had to carry up first a table, which, however small, was too heavy for her; and afterwards all the choice portions of the meal, which she had taken great pains to arrange on the table, as she had seen such things done at Hamley, intermixed with fruit and flowers that had that morning been sent in from various great houses where Mr. Gibson was respected and valued. How pretty Molly had thought her handiwork an hour or two before! How dreary it seemed as, at last released from Mrs. Gibson's conversation, she sate down in solitude to cold tea and the drumsticks of the chicken! No one to look at her preparations, and admire her deft-handedness and taste! She had thought that her father would be gratified by it, and then he had never seen it. She had meant her cares as an offering of good-will to her stepmother, who even now was ringing her bell to have the tray taken away, and Miss Gibson summoned to her bedroom.

Molly hastily finished her meal, and went upstairs again.

"I feel so lonely, darling, in this strange house;

do come and be with me, and help me to unpack. I think your dear papa might have put off his visit to Mr. Craven Smith for just this one evening."

"Mr. Craven Smith couldn't put off his dying," said Molly, bluntly.

"You droll girl!" said Mrs. Gibson, with a faint laugh. "But if this Mr. Smith is dying, as you say, what's the use of your father's going off to him in such a hurry? Does he expect any legacy, or anything of that kind?"

Molly bit her lips to prevent herself from saying something disagreeable. She only answered,—

"I don't quite know that he is dying. The man said so; and papa can sometimes do something to make the last struggle easier. At any rate, it's always a comfort to the family to have him."

"What dreary knowledge of death you have learned for a girl of your age! Really, if I had heard all these details of your father's profession, I doubt if I could have brought myself to have him!"

"He doesn't make the illness or the death; he does his best against them. I call it a very fine thing to think of what he does or tries to do. And you will think so, too, when you see how he is watched for and how people welcome him!"

"Well, don't let us talk any more of such gloomy things, to-night! I think I shall go to bed at once, I am so tired, if you will only sit by me till I get sleepy, darling. If you will talk to me, the sound of your voice will soon send me off."

Molly got a book, and read her stepmother to sleep, preferring that to the harder task of keeping up a continual murmur of speech.

Then she stole down and went into the dining-room, where the fire was gone out; purposely neglected by the servants, to mark their displeasure at their new mistress's having had her tea in her own room. Molly managed to light it, however, before her father came home, and collected and re-arranged some comfortable food for him. Then she knelt down again on the hearth-rug, gazing into the fire in a dreamy reverie, which had enough of sadness about it to cause the tear to drop unnoticed from her eyes. But she jumped up, and shook herself into brightness at the sound of her father's step.

"How is Mr. Craven Smith?" said she.

"Dead. He just recognized me. He was one of my first patients on coming to Hollingford."

Mr. Gibson sate down in the arm-chair made ready for him, and warmed his hands at the fire, seeming neither to need food nor talk, as he went over a train of recollections. Then he roused himself from his sadness, and looking round the room, he said briskly enough, —

"And where's the new mamma?"

"She was tired, and went to bed early. Oh, papa! must I call her 'mamma?'"

"I should like it," replied he, with a slight contraction of the brows.

Molly was silent. She put a cup of tea near him; he stirred it, and sipped it, and then he recurred to the subject.

"Why shouldn't you call her 'mamma?' I'm sure she means to do the duty of a mother to you. We all may make mistakes, and her ways may not be quit

all at once our ways; but at any rate let us start with a family bond between us."

What would Roger say was right? — that was the question that rose to Molly's mind. She had always spoken of her father's new wife as Mrs. Gibson, and had once burst out at Miss Brownings' with a protestation that she never would call her "mamma." She did not feel drawn to her new relation by their intercourse that evening. She kept silence, though she knew her father was expecting an answer. At last he gave up his expectation, and turned to another subject; told about their journey, questioned her as to the Hamleys, the Brownings, Lady Harriet, and the afternoon they had passed together at the Manor-house. But there was a certain hardness and constraint in his manner, and in hers a heaviness and absence of mind. All at once she said, —

"Papa, I will call her 'mamma!'"

He took her hand, and grasped it tight; but for an instant or two he did not speak. Then he said, —

"You won't be sorry for it, Molly, when you come to lie as poor Craven Smith did to-night."

For some time the murmurs and grumblings of the two elder servants were confined to Molly's ears, then they spread to her father's, who, to Molly's dismay, made summary work with them.

"You don't like Mrs. Gibson's ringing her bell so often, don't you? You've been spoilt, I'm afraid; but if you don't conform to my wife's desires, you have the remedy in your own hands, you know."

What servant ever resisted the temptation to give warning after such a speech as that? Betty told Molly she was going to leave, in as indifferent a manner as

she could possibly assume towards the girl, whom she had tended and been about for the last sixteen years. Molly had hitherto considered her former nurse as a fixture in the house; she would almost as soon have thought of her father's proposing to sever the relationship between them; and here was Betty coolly talking over whether her next place should be in town or country. But a great deal of this was assumed hardness. In a week or two Betty was in floods of tears at the prospect of leaving her nursling, and would fain have stayed and answered all the bells in the house once every quarter of an hour. Even Mr. Gibson's masculine heart was touched by the sorrow of the old servant, which made itself obvious to him every time he came across her by her broken voice and her swollen eyes.

One day he said to Molly, "I wish you'd ask your mamma if Betty might not stay, if she made a proper apology, and all that sort of thing."

"I don't much think it will be of any use," said Molly, in a mournful voice. "I know she is writing, or has written, about some under-housemaid at the Towers."

"Well! — all I want is peace and a decent quantity of cheerfulness when I come home. I see enough of tears at other people's houses. After all, Betty has been with us sixteen years — a sort of service of the antique world. But the woman may be happier elsewhere. Do as you like about asking mamma; only if she agrees, I shall be quite willing."

So Molly tried her hand at making a request to that effect to Mrs. Gibson. Her instinct told her

should be unsuccessful; but surely favour was never refused in so soft a tone.

"My dear girl, I should never have thought of sending an old servant away, — one who has had the charge of you from your birth, or nearly so. I could not have had the heart to do it. She might have stayed for ever for me, if she had only attended to all my wishes; and I am not unreasonable, am I? But, you see, she complained; and when your dear papa spoke to her, she gave warning; and it is quite against my principles ever to take an apology from a servant who has given warning."

"She is so sorry," pleaded Molly; "she says she will do anything you wish, and attend to all your orders, if she may only stay."

"But, sweet one, you seem to forget that I cannot go against my principles, however much I may be sorry for Betty. She should not have given way to ill-temper, as I said before; although I never liked her, and considered her a most inefficient servant, thoroughly spoilt by having had no mistress for so long, I should have borne with her — at least, I think I should — as long as I could. Now I have all but engaged Maria, who was under-housemaid at the Towers, so don't let me hear any more of Betty's sorrow, or anybody else's sorrow, for I'm sure, what with your dear papa's sad stories and other things, I'm getting quite low."

Molly was silent for a moment or two.

"Have you quite engaged Maria?" asked she.

"No — I said 'all but engaged.' Sometimes one would think you did not hear things, dear Molly!" replied Mrs. Gibson, petulantly. "Maria is living in a place where they don't give her as much wages as she

deserves. Perhaps they can't afford it, poor things! I'm always sorry for poverty, and would never speak hardly of those who are not rich; but I have offered her two pounds more than she gets at present, so I think she'll leave. At any rate, if they increase her wages, I shall increase my offer in proportion; so I think I'm sure to get her. Such a genteel girl! — always brings in a letter on a salver!"

"Poor Betty!" said Molly, softly.

"Poor old soul! I hope she'll profit by the lesson, I'm sure," sighed out Mrs. Gibson; "but it's a pity we hadn't Maria before the county families began to call."

Mrs. Gibson had been highly gratified by the circumstance of so many calls "from county families." Her husband was much respected; and many ladies from various halls, courts, and houses, who had profited by his services towards themselves and their families, thought it right to pay his new wife the attention of a call when they drove into Hollingford to shop. The state of expectation into which these calls threw Mrs. Gibson rather diminished Mr. Gibson's domestic comfort. It was awkward to be carrying hot, savoury-smelling dishes from the kitchen to the dining-room at the very time when high-born ladies, with noses of aristocratic refinement, might be calling. Still more awkward was the accident which happened in consequence of clumsy Betty's haste to open the front door to a lofty footman's ran-tan, which caused her to set down the basket containing the dirty plates right in his mistress's way, as she stepped gingerly through the comparative darkness of the hall; and then the young men, leaving the dining-room quietly enough, but bursting with long-repressed giggle, or no longer restraining their tender

practical joking, no matter who might be in the passage when they made their exit. The remedy proposed by Mrs. Gibson for all these distressing grievances was a late dinner. The luncheon for the young men, as she observed to her husband, might be sent into the surgery. A few elegant cold trifles for herself and Molly would not scent the house, and she would always take care to have some little dainty ready for him. He acceded, but unwillingly, for it was an innovation on the habits of a lifetime, and he felt as if he should never be able to arrange his rounds aright with this new-fangled notion of a six o'clock dinner.

"Don't get any dainties for me, my dear; bread-and-cheese is the chief of my diet, like it was that of the old woman's."

"I know nothing of your old woman," replied his wife; "but really I cannot allow cheese to come beyond the kitchen."

"Then I'll eat it there," said he. "It's close to the stable-yard, and if I come in in a hurry I can get it in a moment."

"Really, Mr. Gibson, it is astonishing to compare your appearance and manners with your tastes. You look such a gentleman, as dear Lady Cumnor used to say."

Then the cook left; also an old servant, though not so old a one as Betty. The cook did not like the trouble of late dinners; and, being a Methodist, she objected on religious grounds to trying any of Mrs. Gibson's new receipts for French dishes. It was not scriptural, she said. There was a deal of mention of food in the Bible; but it was of sheep ready dressed, which meant mutton, and of wine, and of bread-and-

milk, and figs and raisins, of fatted calves, a good well-browned fillet of veal, and such like; but it had always gone against her conscience to cook swine-flesh and make raised pork-pies, and now if she was to be set to cook heathen dishes after the fashion of the Papists, she'd sooner give it all up together. So the cook followed in Betty's track, and Mr. Gibson had to satisfy his healthy English appetite on badly-made omelettes, rissoles, vol-au-vents, croquets, and timbales; never being exactly sure what he was eating.

He had made up his mind before his marriage to yield in trifles, and be firm in greater things. But the differences of opinion about trifles arose every day, and were perhaps more annoying than if they had related to things of more consequence. Molly knew her father's looks as well as she knew her alphabet; his wife did not; and being an unperceptive person, except when her own interests were dependent upon another person's humour, never found out how he was worried by all the small daily concessions which he made to her will or her whims. He never allowed himself to put any regret into shape, even in his own mind; he repeatedly reminded himself of his wife's good qualities, and comforted himself by thinking they should work together better as time rolled on; but he was very angry at a bachelor great-uncle of Mr. Coxe's, who, after taking no notice of his red-headed nephew for years, suddenly sent for him, after the old man had partially recovered from a serious attack of illness, and appointed him his heir, on condition that his great-nephew remained with him during the remainder of his life. This had happened almost directly after Mr. and Mrs. Gibson's return from their wedding journey, and once or twice since that

time Mr. Gibson had found himself wondering why the deuce old Benson could not have made up his mind sooner, and so have rid his house of the unwelcome presence of the young lover. To do Mr. Coxe justice, in the very last conversation he had as a pupil with Mr. Gibson he had said, with hesitating awkwardness, that perhaps the new circumstances in which he should be placed might make some difference with regard to Mr. Gibson's opinion on —

"Not at all," said Mr. Gibson, quickly. "You are both of you too young to know your own minds; and if my daughter was silly enough to be in love, she should never have to calculate her happiness on the chances of an old man's death. I daresay he'll disinherit you after all. He may do, and then you'd be worse off than ever. No! go away, and forget all this nonsense; and when you've done, come back and see us!"

So Mr. Coxe went away, with an oath of unalterable faithfulness in his heart; and Mr. Gibson had unwillingly to fulfil an old promise made to a gentleman farmer in the neighbourhood a year or two before, and to take the second son of Mr. Browne in young Coxe's place. He was to be the last of the race of pupils, and he was rather more than a year younger than Molly. Mr. Gibson trusted that there would be no repetition of the Coxe romance.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Bride at Home.

Among the "county people" (as Mrs. Gibson termed them) who called upon her as a bride, were the two young Mr. Hamleys. The squire, their father, had done his congratulations, as far as he ever intended to do them, to Mr. Gibson himself when he came to the hall; but Mrs. Hamley, unable to go and pay visits herself, anxious to show attention to her kind doctor's new wife, and with perhaps a little sympathetic curiosity as to how Molly and her stepmother got on together, made her sons ride over to Hollingford with her cards and apologies. They came into the newly-furnished drawing-room, looking bright and fresh from their ride: Osborne first, as usual, perfectly dressed for the occasion, and with the sort of fine manner which sate so well upon him; Roger, looking like a strong-built, cheerful, intelligent country farmer, followed in his brother's train. Mrs. Gibson was dressed for receiving callers, and made the effect she always intended to produce, of a very pretty woman, no longer in first youth, but with such soft manners and such a caressing voice, that people forgot to wonder what her real age might be. Molly was better dressed than formerly; her stepmother saw after that. She disliked anything old or shabby, or out of taste about her; it hurt her eye; and she had already fidgeted Molly into a new amount of care about the manner in which she put on her clo'

arranged her hair, and was gloved and shod. Mrs. Gibson had tried to put her through a course of rosemary washes and creams in order to improve her tanned complexion; but about that Molly was either forgetful or rebellious, and Mrs. Gibson could not well come up to the girl's bed-room every night and see that she daubed her face and neck over with the cosmetics so carefully provided for her. Still her appearance was extremely improved, even to Osborne's critical eye. Roger sought rather to discover in her looks and expression whether she was happy or not; his mother had especially charged him to note all these signs.

Osborne and Mrs. Gibson made themselves agreeable to each other according to the approved fashion when a young man calls on a middle-aged bride. They talked of the "Shakspeare and musical glasses" of the day, each vieing with the other in their knowledge of London topics. Molly heard fragments of their conversation in the pauses of silence between Roger and herself. Her hero was coming out in quite a new character; no longer literary or poetical, or romantic, or critical, he was now full of the last new play, the singers at the opera. He had the advantage over Mrs. Gibson, who, in fact, only spoke of these things from hearsay, from listening to the talk at the Towers, while Osborne had run up from Cambridge two or three times to hear this, or to see that wonder of the season. But she had the advantage over him in greater boldness of invention to eke out her facts; and besides she had more skill in the choice and arrangement of her words so as to make it appear as if the opinions that were in reality quotations, were formed by herself from actual experience or personal observation; such as, in speak-

ing of the mannerisms of a famous Italian singer, she would ask, —

"Did you observe her constant trick of heaving her shoulders and clasping her hands together before she took a high note?" — which was so said as to imply that Mrs. Gibson herself had noticed this trick. Molly, who had a pretty good idea by this time of how her stepmother had passed the last year of her life, listened with no small bewilderment to this conversation; but at length decided that she must misunderstand what they were saying, as she could not gather up the missing links for the necessity of replying to Roger's questions and remarks. Osborne was not the same Osborne he was when with his mother at the Hall.

Roger saw Molly glancing at his brother.

"You think my brother looking ill?" said he, lowering his voice.

"No — not exactly."

"He is not well. Both my father and I are anxious about him. That run on the Continent did him harm, instead of good; and his disappointment at his examination has told upon him, I'm afraid."

"I was not thinking he looked ill; only changed somehow."

"He says he must go back to Cambridge soon. Possibly it may do him good; and I shall be off next week. This is a farewell visit to you, as well as one of congratulation to Mrs. Gibson."

"Your mother will feel your both going away, won't she? But of course young men will always have to live away from home."

"Yes, he replied. "Still she feels it a good d and I'm not satisfied about her health either.

will go out and see her sometimes, will you? she is very fond of you."

"If I may," said Molly, unconsciously glancing at her stepmother. She had an uncomfortable instinct that, in spite of Mrs. Gibson's own perpetual flow of words, she could, and did, hear everything that fell from Molly's lips.

"Do you want any more books?" said he. "If you do, make a list out, and send it to my mother before I leave, next Tuesday. After I am gone, there will be no one to go into the library and pick them out."

As soon as they had left, Mrs. Gibson began her usual comments on the departed visitors.

"I do like that Osborne Hamley! What a nice fellow he is! Somehow, I always do like the eldest sons. He will have the estate, won't he? I shall ask your dear papa to encourage him to come about the house. He will be a very good, very pleasant acquaintance for you and Cynthia. The other is but a loutish young fellow, to my mind; there is no aristocratic bearing about him. I suppose he takes after his mother, who is but a parvenue, I've heard them say at the Towers."

Molly was spiteful enough to have great pleasure in saying, —

"I think I've heard her father was a Russian merchant, and imported tallow and hemp. Mr. Osborne Hamley is extremely like her."

"Indeed! But there's no calculating these things. Anyhow, he is the perfect gentleman in appearance and manner. The estate is entailed, is it not?"

"I know nothing about it," said Molly.

A short silence ensued. Then Mrs. Gibson said, —

"Do you know, I almost think I must get dear papa to give a little dinner-party, and ask Mr. Osborne Hamley? I should like to have him feel at home in this house. It would be something cheerful for him after the dulness and solitude of Hamley Hall. For the old people don't visit much, I believe?"

"He's going back to Cambridge next week," said Molly.

"Is he? Well, then, we'll put off our little dinner till Cynthia comes home. I should like to have some young society for her, poor darling, when she returns."

"When is she coming?" said Molly, who had always a longing curiosity for this same Cynthia's return.

"Oh! I'm not sure; perhaps at the new year — perhaps not till Easter. I must get this drawing-room all new furnished first; and then I mean to fit up her room and yours just alike. They are just the same size, only on opposite sides of the passage."

"Are you going to new-furnish that room?" said Molly, in astonishment at the never-ending changes.

"Yes; and yours, too, darling; so don't be jealous."

"Oh, please, mamma, not mine," said Molly, taking in the idea for the first time.

"Yes, dear! You shall have yours done as well. A little French bed, and a new paper, and a pretty carpet, and a dressed-up toilet-table and glass, will make it look quite a different place."

"But I don't want it to look different. I like it as it is. Pray don't do anything to it."

"What nonsense, child! I never heard anything more ridiculous! Most girls would be glad to get rid of furniture only fit for the lumber-room."

"It was my own mamma's before she was married," said Molly, in a very low voice; bringing out this last plea unwillingly, but with a certainty that it would not be resisted.

Mrs. Gibson paused for a moment before she replied:

"It's very much to your credit that you should have such feelings, I'm sure. But don't you think sentiment may be carried too far? Why, we should have no new furniture at all, and should have to put up with worm-eaten horrors. Besides, my dear, Hollingford will seem very dull to Cynthia, after pretty, gay France, and I want to make the first impressions attractive. I've a notion I can settle her down near here; and I want her to come in a good temper; for, between ourselves, my dear, she is a little, leetle wilful. You need not mention this to your papa."

"But can't you do Cynthia's room, and not mine? Please let mine alone."

"No, indeed! I couldn't agree to that. Only think what would be said of me by everybody; petting my own child and neglecting my husband's! I couldn't bear it."

"No one need know."

"In such a tittle-tattle place as Hollingford! Really, Molly, you are either very stupid or very obstinate, or else you don't care what hard things may be said about me; and all for a selfish fancy of your own! No! I owe myself the justice of acting in this matter as I please. Every one shall know I'm not a common

stepmother. Every penny I spend on Cynthia I shall spend on you too; so it's no use talking any more about it."

So Molly's little white dimity bed, her old-fashioned chest of drawers, and her other cherished relics of her mother's maiden-days, were consigned to the lumber-room; and after a while, when Cynthia and her great French boxes had come home, the old furniture that had filled up the space required for the fresh importation of trunks, disappeared likewise into the same room.

All this time the family at the Towers had been absent; Lady Cumnor had been ordered to Bath for the early part of the winter, and her family were with her there. On dull rainy days, Mrs. Gibson used to bethink her of missing "the Cumnors," for so she had taken to calling them since her position had become more independent of theirs. It marked a distinction between her intimacy in the family, and the reverential manner in which the townspeople were accustomed to speak of "the earl and the countess." Both Lady Cumnor and Lady Harriet wrote to their "dear Clare" from time to time. The former had generally some commissions that she wished to have executed at the Towers, or in the town; and no one could do them so well as Clare, who was acquainted with all the tastes and ways of the countess. These commissions were the cause of various bills for flys and cars from the George Inn. Mr. Gibson pointed out this consequence to his wife; but she, in return, bade him remark that a present of game was pretty sure to follow upon the satisfactory execution of Lady Cumnor's wishes. Somehow, Mr. Gibson did not quite like this consequence

either; but he was silent about it, at any rate. Lady Harriet's letters were short and amusing. She had that sort of regard for her old governess which prompted her to write from time to time, and to feel glad when the half-voluntary task was accomplished. So there was no real outpouring of confidence, but enough news of the family and gossip of the place she was in, as she thought would make Clare feel that she was not forgotten by her former pupils, intermixed with moderate but sincere expressions of regard. How those letters were quoted and referred to by Mrs. Gibson in her conversations with the Hollingford ladies! She had found out their effect at Ashcombe; and it was not less at Hollingford. But she was rather perplexed at kindly messages to Molly, and at inquiries as to how the Miss Brownings liked the tea she had sent; and Molly had first to explain, and then to narrate at full length, all the occurrences of the afternoon at Ashcombe Manor-house, and Lady Harriet's subsequent call upon her at Miss Brownings'.

"What nonsense!" said Mrs. Gibson, with some annoyance. "Lady Harriet only went to see you out of a desire of amusement. She would only make fun of Miss Brownings, and those two will be quoting her and talking about her, just as if she was their intimate friend."

"I don't think she did make fun of them. She really seemed as if she had been very kind."

"And you suppose you know her ways better than I do who have known her these fifteen years? I tell you she turns every one into ridicule who does not belong to her set. Why, she used always to speak of Miss Brownings as 'Pecksy and Flapsy.'"

"She promised me she would not," said Molly driven to bay.

"Promised you! — Lady Harriet? What do you mean?"

"Only — she spoke of them as Pecksy and Flapsy — and when she talked of coming to call on me at their house, I asked her not to come if she was going to — to make fun of them."

"Upon my word! with all my long acquaintance with Lady Harriet, I should never have ventured on such impertinence."

"I didn't mean it as impertinence," said Molly sturdily. "And I don't think Lady Harriet took it as such."

"You can't know anything about it. She can put on any kind of manner."

Just then Squire Hamley came in. It was his first call; and Mrs. Gibson gave him a graceful welcome, and was quite ready to accept his apology for its tardiness, and to assure him that she quite understood the pressure of business on every landowner who farmed his own estate. But no such apology was made. He shook her hand heartily, as a mark of congratulation on her good fortune in having secured such a prize as his friend Gibson, but said nothing about his long neglect of duty. Molly, who by this time knew the few strong expressions of his countenance well, was sure that something was the matter, and that he was very much disturbed. He hardly attended to Mrs. Gibson's fluent opening of conversation, for she had already determined to make a favourable impression on the father of the handsome young man who was heir to an estate, besides his own personal agreeableness; but he

turned to Molly, and, addressing her, said — almost in a low voice, as if he was making a confidence to her that he did not intend Mrs. Gibson to hear, —

"Molly, we are all wrong at home! Osborne has lost the fellowship at Trinity he went back to try for. Then he has gone and failed miserably in his degree, after all that he said, and that his mother said; and I, like a fool, went and boasted about my clever son. I can't understand it. I never expected anything extraordinary from Roger; but Osborne—! And then it has thrown madam into one of her bad fits of illness; and she seems to have a fancy for you, child! Your father came to see her this morning. Poor thing, she's very poorly, I'm afraid; and she told him how she should like to have you about her, and he said I might fetch you. You'll come, won't you, my dear? She's not a poor woman, such as many people think it's the only charity to be kind to, but she's just as forlorn of woman's care as if she was poor — worse, I daresay."

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," said Molly, much touched by the squire's words and manner, never thinking of asking her stepmother's consent, now that she had heard that her father had given his. As she rose to leave the room, Mrs. Gibson, who had only half heard what the squire had said, and was a little affronted at the exclusiveness of his confidence, said, — "My dear, where are you going?"

"Mrs. Hamley wants me, and papa says I may go," said Molly; and almost at the same time the squire replied, —

"My wife is ill, and as she's very fond of your

daughter, she begged Mr. Gibson to allow her to come to the Hall for a little while, and he kindly said she might, and I'm come to fetch her."

"Stop a minute, darling," said Mrs. Gibson to Molly — a slight cloud over her countenance, in spite of her caressing word. "I am sure dear papa quite forgot that you were to go out with me to-night, to visit people," continued she, addressing herself to the squire, "with whom I am quite unacquainted — and it is very uncertain if Mr. Gibson can return in time to accompany me — so, you see, I cannot allow Molly to go with you."

"I shouldn't have thought it would have signified. Brides are always brides, I suppose; and it's their part to be timid; but I shouldn't have thought it — in this case. And my wife sets her heart on things, as sick people do. Well, Molly" (in a louder tone, for these foregoing sentences were spoken *sotto voce*), "we must put it off till to-morrow: and it's our loss, not yours," he continued, as he saw the reluctance with which she slowly returned to her place. "You'll be as gay as can be to-night, I daresay——"

"No, I shall not," broke in Molly. "I never wanted to go, and now I shall want it less than ever."

"Hush, my dear," said Mrs. Gibson; and, addressing the squire, she added, "The visiting here is not all one could wish for so young a girl — no young people, no dances, nothing of gaiety; but it is wrong in you, Molly, to speak against such kind friends of your father's as I understand these Cockerells are. Don't give so bad an impression of yourself to the kind squire."

"Let her alone! let her alone!" quoth he. "I see

what she means. She'd rather come and be in my wife's sick-room than go out for this visit to-night. Is there no way of getting her off?"

"None whatever," said Mrs. Gibson. "An engagement is an engagement with me; and I consider that she is not only engaged to Mrs. Cockerell, but to me — bound to accompany me, in my husband's absence."

The squire was put out; and when he was put out he had a trick of placing his hands on his knees and whistling softly to himself. Molly knew this phase of his displeasure, and only hoped he would confine himself to this wordless expression of annoyance. It was pretty hard work for her to keep the tears out of her eyes; and she endeavoured to think of something else, rather than dwell on regrets and annoyances. She heard Mrs. Gibson talking on in a sweet monotone, and wished to attend to what she was saying, but the squire's visible annoyance struck sharper on her mind. At length, after a pause of silence, he started up, and said, —

"Well! it's no use. Poor madam; she won't like it. She'll be disappointed! But it's but for one evening! — but for one evening! She may come to-morrow, mayn't she? Or will the dissipation of such an evening as she describes, be too much for her?"

There was a touch of savage irony in his manner which frightened Mrs. Gibson into good behaviour.

"She shall be ready at any time you name. I am so sorry: my foolish shyness is in fault, I believe; but still you must acknowledge that an engagement is an engagement."

"Did I ever say an engagement was an elephant, madam? However, there's no use saying any more

about it, or I shall forget my manners. I'm an old tyrant, and she — lying there in bed, poor girl — has always given me my own way. So you'll excuse me, Mrs. Gibson, won't you; and let Molly come along with me at ten to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Gibson, smiling. But when his back was turned, she said to Molly, —

"Now, my dear, I must never have you exposing me to the ill-manners of such a man again! I don't call him a squire; I call him a boor, or a yeoman at best. You must not go on accepting or rejecting invitations as if you were an independent young lady, Molly. Pay me the respect of a reference to my wishes another time, if you please, my dear!"

"Papa had said I might go," said Molly, choking a little.

"As I am now your mamma, your references must be to me, for the future. But as you are to go you may as well look well dressed. I will lend you my new shawl for this visit, if you like it, and my set of green ribbons. I am always indulgent when proper respect is paid to me. And in such a house as Hamley Hall, no one can tell who may be coming and going, even if there is sickness in the family."

"Thank you. But I don't want the shawl and the ribbons, please: there will be nobody there except the family. There never is, I think; and now that she is so ill" — Molly was on the point of crying at the thought of her friend lying ill and lonely, and looking for her arrival. Moreover, she was sadly afraid lest the squire had gone off with the idea that she did not want to come — that she preferred that stupid, stupid party at the Cockerells'. Mrs. Gibson, too, was sorry;

she had an uncomfortable consciousness of having given way to temper before a stranger, and a stranger, too, whose good opinion she had meant to cultivate; and she was also annoyed at Molly's tearful face.

"What can I do for you, to bring you back into good temper?" she said. "First, you insist upon your knowing Lady Harriet better than I do — I, who have known her for eighteen or nineteen years at least. Then you jump at invitations without ever consulting me, or thinking of how awkward it would be for me to go stumping into a drawing-room all by myself; following my new name, too, which always makes me feel uncomfortable, it is such a sad come-down after Kirkpatrick! And then, when I offer you some of the prettiest things I have got, you say it does not signify how you are dressed. What can I do to please you, Molly? I, who delight in nothing more than peace in a family, to see you sitting there with despair upon your face?"

Molly could stand it no longer; she went upstairs to her own room — her own smart new room, which hardly yet seemed a familiar place; and began to cry so heartily and for so long a time, that she stopped at length for very weariness. She thought of Mrs. Hamley wearying for her; of the old Hall whose very quietness might become oppressive to an ailing person; of the trust the squire had had in her that she would come off directly with him. And all this oppressed her much more than the querulousness of her stepmother's words.

CHAPTER XVII.

Trouble at Hamley Hall.

If Molly thought that peace dwelt perpetually at Hamley Hall she was sorely mistaken. Something was out of tune in the whole establishment; and, for a very unusual thing, the common irritation seemed to have produced a common bond. All the servants were old in their places, and were told by some one of the family, or gathered, from the unheeded conversation carried on before them, everything that affected master or mistress or either of the young gentlemen. Any one of them could have told Molly that the grievance which lay at the root of everything, was the amount of the bills run up by Osborne at Cambridge, and which, now that all chance of his obtaining a fellowship was over, came pouring down upon the squire. But Molly, confident of being told by Mrs. Hamley herself anything which she wished her to hear, encouraged no confidences from any one else.

She was struck with the change in "madam's" look as soon as she caught sight of her in the darkened room, lying on the sofa in her dressing-room, all dressed in white, which almost rivalled the white wanness of her face. The squire ushered Molly in with,—

"Here she is at last!" and Molly had scarcely imagined that he had so much variety in the tones of his voice — the beginning of the sentence was spoken in a loud congratulatory manner, while the last words

were scarcely audible. He had seen the death-like pallor on his wife's face; not a new sight, and one which had been presented to him gradually enough, but which was now always giving him a fresh shock. It was a lovely tranquil winter's day; every branch and every twig on the trees and shrubs were glittering with drops of the sun-melted hoar-frost; a robin was perched on a holly-bush, piping cheerily; but the blinds were down, and out of Mrs. Hamley's windows nothing of all this was to be seen. There was even a large screen placed between her and the wood-fire, to keep off that cheerful blaze. Mrs. Hamley stretched out one hand to Molly, and held hers firm; with the other she shaded her eyes.

"She is not so well this morning," said the squire, shaking his head. "But never fear, my dear one; here's the doctor's daughter, nearly as good as the doctor himself. Have you had your medicine? Your beef-tea?" he continued, going about on heavy tiptoe and peeping into every empty cup and glass. Then he returned to the sofa; looked at her for a minute or two, and then softly kissed her, and told Molly he would leave her in charge.

As if Mrs. Hamley was afraid of Molly's remarks or questions, she began in her turn a hasty system of interrogatories.

"Now, dear child, tell me all; it's no breach of confidence, for I shan't mention it again, and I shan't be here long. How does it all go on — the new mother, the good resolutions? let me help you if I can. I think with a girl I could have been of use — a mother does not know boys. But tell me anything you like and will; don't be afraid of details."

Even with Molly's small experience of illness she saw how much of restless fever there was in this speech; and instinct, or some such gift, prompted her to tell a long story of many things — the wedding-day, her visit to Miss Brownings', the new furniture, Lady Harriet, &c., all in an easy flow of talk which was very soothing to Mrs. Hamley, inasmuch as it gave her something to think about beyond her own immediate sorrows. But Molly did not speak of her own grievances, nor of the new domestic relationship. Mrs. Hamley noticed this.

"And you and Mrs. Gibson get on happily together?"

"Not always," said Molly. "You know we didn't know much of each other before we were put to live together."

"I didn't like what the squire told me last night. He was very angry."

That sore had not yet healed over; but Molly resolutely kept silence, beating her brains to think of some other subject of conversation.

"Ah! I see, Molly," said Mrs. Hamley; "you won't tell me your sorrows, and yet, perhaps, I could have done you some good."

"I don't like," said Molly, in a low voice. "I think papa wouldn't like it. And, besides, you have helped me so much — you and Mr. Roger Hamley. I often think of the things he said; they come in so usefully, and are such a strength to me."

"Ah, Roger! yes. He is to be trusted. Oh, Molly! I've a great deal to say to you myself, only not now. I must have my medicine and try to go to sleep. Good girl! You are stronger than I am, and can do without sympathy."

Molly was taken to another room; the maid who conducted her to it told her that Mrs. Hamley had not wished her to have her nights disturbed, as they might very probably have been if she had been in her former sleeping-room. In the afternoon Mrs. Hamley sent for her, and with the want of reticence common to invalids, especially to those suffering from long and depressing maladies, she told Molly of the family distress and disappointment.

She made Molly sit down near her on a little stool, and, holding her hand, and looking into her eyes to catch her spoken sympathy from their expression quicker than she could from her words, she said, —

"Osborne has so disappointed us! I cannot understand it yet. And the squire was so terribly angry! I cannot think how all the money was spent — advances through money-lenders, besides bills. The squire does not show me how angry he is now, because he's afraid of another attack; but I know how angry he is. You see he has been spending ever so much money in reclaiming that land at Upton Common, and is very hard pressed himself. But it would have doubled the value of the estate, and so we never thought anything of economies which would benefit Osborne in the long run. And now the squire says he must mortgage some of the land; and you can't think how it cuts him to the heart. He sold a great deal of timber to send the two boys to college. Osborne — oh! what a dear, innocent boy he was: he was the heir, you know; and he was so clever, every one said he was sure of honours and a fellowship, and I don't know what-all; and he did get a scholarship, and then all went wrong. I don't know how. That is the worst. Perhaps the

squire wrote too angrily, and that stopped up confidence. But he might have told me. He would have done, I think, Molly, if he had been here, face to face with me. But the squire, in his anger, told him not to show his face at home till he had paid off the debts he had incurred out of his allowance. Out of two hundred and fifty a year to pay off more than nine hundred, one way or another! And not to come home till then! Perhaps Roger will have debts too! He had but two hundred; but, then, he was not the eldest son. The squire has given orders that the men are to be turned off the draining works; and I lie awake thinking of their poor families this wintry weather. But what shall we do? I've never been strong, and perhaps, I've been extravagant in my habits; and there were family traditions as to expenditure, and the reclaiming of this land. Oh! Molly, Osborne was such a sweet little baby, and such a loving boy: so clever, too! You know I read you some of his poetry: now, could a person who wrote like that do anything very wrong? And yet I'm afraid he has."

"Don't you know, at all, how the money has gone?" asked Molly.

"No! not at all. That's the sting. There are tailor's bills, and bills for book-binding and wine and pictures — those come to four or five hundred; and though this expenditure is extraordinary — inexplicable to such simple old folk as we are — yet it may be only the luxury of the present day. But the money for which he will give no account, — of which, indeed, we only heard through the squire's London agents, who found out that certain disreputable attorneys were making inquiries as to the entail of th

estate; — oh! Molly, worse than all — I don't know how to bring myself to tell you — as to the age and health of the squire, his dear father" — (she began to sob almost hysterically; yet she would go on talking, in spite of Molly's efforts to stop her) — "who held him in his arms, and blessed him, even before I had kissed him; and thought always so much of him as his heir and first-born darling. How he has loved him! How I have loved him! I sometimes have thought of late that we've almost done that good Roger injustice."

"No! I'm sure you've not: only look at the way he loves you. Why, you are his first thought: he may not speak about it, but any one may see it. And dear, dear Mrs. Hamley," said Molly, determined to say out all that was in her mind now that she had once got the word, "don't you think that it would be better not to misjudge Mr. Osborne Hamley? We don't know what he has done with the money: he is so good (is he not?) that he may have wanted it to relieve some poor person — some tradesman, for instance, pressed by creditors — some —"

"You forget, dear," said Mrs. Hamley, smiling a little at the girl's impetuous romance, but sighing the next instant, "that all the other bills come from tradesmen, who complain piteously of being kept out of their money."

Molly was nonplussed for the moment; but then she said, —

"I daresay they imposed upon him. I'm sure I've heard stories of young men being made regular victims of by the shopkeepers in great towns."

"You're a great darling, child," said Mrs. Hamley,

comforted by Molly's strong partisanship, unreasonable and ignorant though it was.

"And, besides," continued Molly, "some one must be acting wrongly in Osborne's — Mr. Osborne Hamley's, I mean — I can't help saying Osborne sometimes, but, indeed, I always think of him as Mr. Osborne —"

"Never mind, Molly, what you call him; only go on talking. It seems to do me good to hear the hopeful side taken. The squire has been so hurt and displeased: strange-looking men coming into the neighbourhood, too, questioning the tenants and grumbling, about the last fall of timber, as if they were calculating on the squire's death."

"That's just what I was going to speak about. Doesn't it show that they are bad men? and would bad men scruple to impose upon him, and to tell lies in his name, and to ruin him?"

"Don't you see, you only make him out weak, instead of wicked?"

"Yes; perhaps I do. But I don't think he is weak. You know yourself, dear Mrs. Hamley, how very clever he really is. Besides, I would rather he was weak than wicked. Weak people may find themselves all at once strong in heaven, when they see things quite clearly; but I don't think the wicked will turn themselves into virtuous people all at once."

"I think I've been very weak, Molly," said Mrs. Hamley, stroking Molly's curls affectionately. "I've made such an idol of my beautiful Osborne; and he turns out to have feet of clay, not strong enough to stand firm on the ground. And that's the best view of his conduct, too!"

What with his anger against his son, and his anxi

about his wife; the difficulty of raising the money immediately required, and his irritation at the scarce-concealed inquiries made by strangers as to the value of his property, the poor squire was in a sad state. He was angry and impatient with every one who came near him; and then was depressed at his own violent temper and unjust words. The old servants, who, perhaps, cheated him in many small things, were beautifully patient under his upbraidings. They could understand bursts of passion, and knew the cause of his variable moods as well as he did himself. The butler, who was accustomed to argue with his master about every fresh direction as to his work, now nudged Molly at dinner-time to make her eat of some dish which she had just been declining, and explained his conduct afterwards as follows: —

"You see, miss, me and cook had planned a dinner as would tempt master to eat; but when you say 'No, thank you,' when I hand you anything, master never so much as looks at it. But if you take a thing, and eats with a relish, why first he waits, and then he looks, and by-and-by he smells; and then he finds out as he's hungry, and falls to eating as natural as a kitten takes to mewing. That's the reason, miss, as I gave you a nudge and a wink, which no one knows better nor me was not manners."

Osborne's name was never mentioned during these tête-à tête meals. The squire asked Molly questions about Hollingford people, but did not seem much to attend to her answers. He used also to ask her every day how she thought that his wife was; but if Molly told the truth — that every day seemed to make her weaker and weaker — he was almost savage with the

girl. He could not bear it; and he would not. Nay, once he was on the point of dismissing Mr. Gibson because he insisted on a consultation with Dr. Nicholls, the great physician of the county.

"It's nonsense thinking her so ill as that — you know it's only the delicacy she's had for years; and if you can't do her any good in such a simple case — no pain — only weakness and nervousness — it is a simple case, eh? — don't look in that puzzled way, man! — you'd better give her up altogether, and I'll take her to Bath or Brighton, or somewhere for change, for in my opinion it's only moping and nervousness."

But the squire's bluff florid face was pinched with anxiety, and worn with the effort of being deaf to the footsteps of fate as he said these words which belied his fears.

Mr. Gibson replied very quietly, —

"I shall go on coming to see her, and I know you will not forbid my visits. But I shall bring Dr. Nicholls with me the next time I come. I may be mistaken in my treatment; and I wish to God he may say I am mistaken in my apprehensions."

"Don't tell me them! I cannot bear them!" cried the squire. "Of course we must all die; and she must too. But not the cleverest doctor in England shall go about coolly meting out the life of such as her. I daresay I shall die first. I hope I shall. But I'll knock any one down who speaks to me of death sitting within me. And, besides, I think all doctors are ignorant quacks, pretending to knowledge they haven't got. Ay, you may smile at me. I don't care. Unless you can tell me I shall die first, neither you nor yo

Nicholls shall come prophesying and croaking about this house."

Mr. Gibson went away, heavy at heart at the thought of Mrs. Hamley's approaching death, but thinking little enough of the squire's speeches. He had almost forgotten them, in fact, when about nine o'clock that evening, a groom rode in from Hamley Hall in hot haste, with a note from the squire.

DEAR GIBSON, —

FOR God's sake forgive me if I was rude to-day. She is much worse. Come and spend the night here. Write for Nicholls, and all the physicians you want. Write before you start off here. They may give her ease. There were Whitworth doctors much talked of in my youth for curing people given up by the regular doctors; can't you get one of them? I put myself in your hands. Sometimes I think it is the turning point, and she'll rally after this bout. I trust all to you.

Yours ever,
R. HAMLEY.

P. S. — Molly is a treasure. — God help me!

Of course Mr. Gibson went; for the first time since his marriage cutting short Mrs. Gibson's querulous lamentations over her life, as involved in that of a doctor called out at all hours of day and night.

He brought Mrs. Hamley through this attack; and for a day or two the squire's alarm and gratitude made him docile in Mr. Gibson's hands. Then he returned to the idea of its being a crisis through which his wife had passed; and that she was now on the way to re-

covery. But the day after the consultation with Dr. Nicholls, Mr. Gibson said to Molly, —

"Molly! I've written to Osborne and Roger. Do you know Osborne's address?"

"No, papa. He's in disgrace. I don't know if the squire knows; and she has been too ill to write."

"Never mind. I'll enclose it to Roger; whatever those lads may be to others, there's a strong brotherly love as ever I saw, between the two. Roger will know. And, Molly, they are sure to come home as soon as they hear my report of their mother's state. I wish you'd tell the squire what I've done. It's not a pleasant piece of work; and I'll tell madam myself in my own way. I'd have told him if he'd been at home; but you say he was obliged to go to Ashcombe on business."

"Quite obliged. He was so sorry to miss you. But, papa, he will be so angry! You don't know how mad he is against Osborne."

Molly dreaded the squire's anger when she gave him her father's message. She had seen quite enough of the domestic relations of the Hamley family to understand that, underneath his old-fashioned courtesy, and the pleasant hospitality he showed to her as a guest, there was a strong will, and a vehement passionate temper, along with that degree of obstinacy in prejudices (or "opinions," as he would have called them) so common to those who have, neither in youth nor in manhood, mixed largely with their kind. She had listened, day after day, to Mrs. Hamley's plaintive murmurs as to the deep disgrace in which Osborne was being held by his father — the prohibition of his coming home; and she hardly knew how to begin to

tell him that the letter summoning Osborne had already been sent off.

Their dinners were tête-à-tête. The squire tried to make them pleasant to Molly, feeling deeply grateful to her for the soothing comfort she was to his wife. He made merry speeches, which sank away into silence, and at which they each forgot to smile. He ordered up rare wines, which she did not care for, but tasted out of complaisance. He noticed that one day she had eaten some brown beurré pears as if she liked them; and as his trees had not produced many this year, he gave directions that this particular kind should be sought for through the neighbourhood. Molly felt that, in many ways, he was full of good-will towards her; but it did not diminish her dread of touching on the one sore point in the family. However, it had to be done, and that without delay.

The great log was placed on the after-dinner fire, the hearth swept up, the ponderous candles snuffed, and then the door was shut, and Molly and the squire were left to their dessert. She sat at the side of the table in her old place. That at the head was vacant; yet as no orders had been given to the contrary, the plate and glasses and napkin were always arranged as regularly and methodically as if Mrs. Hamley would come in as usual. Indeed, sometimes, when the door by which she used to enter was opened by any chance, Molly caught herself looking round as if she expected to see the tall, languid figure in the elegant draperies of rich silk and soft lace, which Mrs. Hamley was wont to wear of an evening.

This evening, it struck her, as a new thought of pain, that into that room she would come no more.

She had fixed to give her father's message at this very point of time; but something in her throat choked her, and she hardly knew how to govern her voice. The squire got up and went to the broad fireplace, to strike into the middle of the great log, and split it up into blazing, sparkling pieces. His back was towards her. Molly began, "When papa was here to-day, he bade me tell you he had written to Mr. Roger Hamley to say that — that he thought he had better come home; and he enclosed a letter to Mr. Osborne Hamley to say the same thing."

The squire put down the poker, but he still kept his back to Molly.

"He sent for Osborne and Roger?" he asked, at length.

Molly answered, "Yes."

Then there was a dead silence, which Molly thought would never end. The squire had placed his two hands on the high chimney-piece, and stood leaning over the fire.

"Roger would have been down from Cambridge on the 18th," said he. "And he has sent for Osborne, too! Did he know," — he continued, turning round to Molly, with something of the fierceness she had anticipated in voice and look. In another moment he had dropped his voice. "It is right, quite right. I understand. It has come at length. Come! come! Osborne has brought it on, though," with a fresh access of anger in his tones. "She might have" (some word Molly could not hear — she thought it sounded like "lingered") "but for that. I cannot forgive him; I cannot."

And then he suddenly left the room. While Molly

sat there still, very sad in her sympathy with all, he put his head in again. —

"Go to her, my dear; I cannot — not just yet. But I will soon. Just this bit; and after that I won't lose a moment. You are a good girl. God bless you!"

It is not to be supposed that Molly had remained all this time at the Hall without interruption. Once or twice her father had brought her a summons home. Molly thought she could perceive that he had brought it unwillingly; in fact, it was Mrs. Gibson that had sent for her, almost, as it were, to preserve a "right of way" through her actions.

"You shall come back to-morrow, or the next day," her father had said. "But mamma seems to think people will put a bad construction on your being so much away from home so soon after our marriage."

"Oh, papa, I'm afraid Mrs. Hamley will miss me! I do so like being with her."

"I don't think it is likely she will miss you as much as she would have done a month or two ago. She sleeps so much now, that she is scarcely conscious of the lapse of time. I'll see that you come back here again in a day or two."

So out of the silence and the soft melancholy of the Hall Molly returned into the all-pervading element of chatter and gossip at Hollingford. Mrs. Gibson received her kindly enough. Once she had a smart new winter bonnet ready to give her as a present; but she did not care to hear any particulars about the friends whom Molly had just left; and her few remarks on the state of affairs at the Hall jarred terribly on the sensitive Molly.

"What a time she lingers! Your papa never expected she would last half so long after that attack. It must be very wearing work to them all; I declare you look quite another creature since you were there. One can only wish it mayn't last, for their sakes."

"You don't know how the squire values every minute," said Molly.

"Why, you say she sleeps a great deal, and doesn't talk much when she's awake, and there's not the slightest hope for her. And yet, at such times, people are kept on the tenter-hooks with watching and waiting. I know it by my dear Kirkpatrick. There really were days when I thought it never would end. But we won't talk any more of such dismal things; you've had quite enough of them, I'm sure, and it always makes me melancholy to hear of illness and death; and yet your papa seems sometimes as if he could talk of nothing else. I'm going to take you out to-night, though, and that will give you something of a change; and I've been getting Miss Rose to trim up one of my old gowns for you; it's too tight for me. There's some talk of dancing, — it's at Mrs. Edward's."

"Oh, mamma, I cannot go!" cried Molly. "I've been so much with her; and she may be suffering so, or even dying — and I to be dancing!"

"Nonsense! You're no relation, so you need not feel it so much. I wouldn't urge you, if she was likely to know about it and be hurt; but as it is, it's all fixed that you are to go; and don't let us have any nonsense about it. We might sit twirling our thumbs, and repeating hymns all our lives long, if we were to do nothing else when people were dying."

"I cannot go," repeated Molly. And, acting t

impulse, and almost to her own surprise, she appealed to her father, who came into the room at this very time. He contracted his dark eyebrows, and looked annoyed as both wife and daughter poured their different sides of the argument into his ears. He sat down in desperation of patience. When his turn came to pronounce a decision, he said, —

"I suppose I can have some lunch? I went away at six this morning, and there's nothing in the dining-room. I have to go off again directly."

Molly started to the door; Mrs. Gibson made haste to ring the bell.

"Where are you going, Molly?" said she, sharply.

"Only to see about papa's lunch."

"There are servants to do it; and I don't like your going into the kitchen."

"Come, Molly! sit down and be quiet," said her father. "One comes home wanting peace and quietness — and food too. If I am to be appealed to, which I beg I may not be another time, I settle that Molly stops at home this evening. I shall come back late and tired. See that I have something ready to eat, goosey, and then I'll dress myself up in my best, and go and fetch you home, my dear. I wish all these wedding festivities were well over. Ready, is it? Then I'll go into the dining-room and gorge myself. A doctor ought to be able to eat like a camel, or like Major Dugald Dalgetty."

It was well for Molly that callers came in just at this time, for Mrs. Gibson was extremely annoyed. They told her some little local piece of news, however, which filled up her mind; and Molly found that, if she only expressed wonder enough at the engagement

they had both heard of from the departed callers, the previous discussion as to her accompanying her stepmother or not might be entirely passed over. Not entirely though; for the next morning she had to listen to a very brilliantly touched up account of the dance and the gaiety which she had missed; and also to be told that Mrs. Gibson had changed her mind about giving her the gown, and thought now that she should reserve it for Cynthia, if only it was long enough; but Cynthia was so tall — quite overgrown, in fact. The chances seemed equally balanced as to whether Molly might not have the gown after all.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Mr. Osborne's Secret.

Osborne and Roger came to the Hall; Molly found Roger established there when she returned after this absence at home. She gathered that Osborne was coming; but very little was said about him in any way. The squire scarcely ever left his wife's room now; he sat by her, watching her, and now and then moaning to himself. She was so much under the influence of opiates that she did not often rouse up; but when she did, she almost invariably asked for Molly. In their rare tête-á-têtes, she would ask after Osborne, — where he was, if he had been told, and if he was coming? In her weakened and confused state of intellect she seemed to have retained two strong impressions — one, of the sympathy with which Molly had received her confidence about Osborne; the other, of the anger which her husband entertained against him. Before the squire she never mentioned Osborne's name; nor did she seem at her ease in speaking about him to Roger, while, when she was alone with Molly, she hardly spoke of any one else. She must have had some sort of wandering idea that Roger blamed his brother, while she remembered Molly's eager defence, which she had thought hopelessly improbable at the time. At any rate she made Molly her confidant about her first-born. She sent her to ask Roger how soon he would come, for she seemed to know perfectly well that he was coming.

"Tell me all Roger says. He will tell you."

But it was several days before Molly could ask Roger any questions; and meanwhile Mrs. Hamley's state had materially altered. At length Molly came upon Roger sitting in the library, his head buried in his hands. He did not hear her footstep till she was close beside him. Then he lifted up his face, red, and stained with tears, his hair all ruffled up and in disorder.

"I've been wanting to see you alone," she began. "Your mother does so want some news of your brother Osborne. She told me last week to ask you about him, but I did not like to speak of him before your father."

"She hardly ever named him to me."

"I don't know why; for to me she used to talk of him perpetually. I have seen so little of her this week, and I think she forgets a great deal now. Still, if you don't mind, I should like to be able to tell her something if she asks me again."

He put his head again between his hands, and did not answer her for some time.

"What does she want to know?" said he, at last. "Does she know that Osborne is coming soon — any day?"

"Yes. But she wants to know where he is."

"I can't tell you. I don't exactly know. I believe he's abroad, but I'm not sure."

"But you've sent papa's letter to him?"

"I've sent it to a friend of his who will know better than I do where he's to be found. You must know that he isn't free from creditors, Molly. You can't have been one of the family, like a child of the

house almost, without knowing that much. For that and for other reasons I don't exactly know where he is."

"I will tell her so. You are sure he will come?"

"Quite sure. But, Molly, I think my mother may live some time yet; don't you? Dr. Nicholls said so yesterday when he was here with your father. He said she had rallied more than he had ever expected. You're not afraid of any change that makes you so anxious for Osborne's coming?"

"No. It's only for her that I asked. She did seem so to crave for news of him. I think she dreamed of him; and then when she wakened it was a relief to her to talk about him to me. She always seemed to associate me with him. We used to speak so much of him when we were together."

"I don't know what we should any of us have done without you. You've been like a daughter to my mother."

"I do so love her," said Molly, softly.

"Yes; I see. Have you ever noticed that she sometimes calls you 'Fanny?' It was the name of a little sister of ours who died. I think she often takes you for her. It was partly that, and partly that at such a time as this one can't stand on formalities that made me call you Molly. I hope you don't mind it?"

"No; I like it. But will you tell me something more about your brother? She really hungers for news of him."

"She'd better ask me herself. Yet, no! I am so involved by promises of secrecy, Molly, that I couldn't satisfy her if she once began to question me. I believe he's in Belgium, and that he went there

about a fortnight ago, partly to avoid his creditors. You know my father has refused to pay his debts?"

"Yes: at least I knew something like it."

"I don't believe my father could raise the money all at once without having recourse to steps which he would exceedingly recoil from. Yet for the time it places Osborne in a very awkward position."

"I think what vexes your father a good deal is some mystery as to how the money was spent."

"If my mother ever says anything about that part of the affair;" said Roger, hastily, "assure her from me that there's nothing of vice or wrong-doing about it. I can't say more: I'm tired. But set her mind at ease on that point."

"I'm not sure if she remembers all her painful anxiety about this," said Molly. "She used to speak a great deal to me about him before you came, when your father seemed so angry. And now, whenever she sees me she wants to talk on the old subject; but she doesn't remember so clearly. If she were to see him I don't believe she would recollect why she was uneasy about him while he was absent."

"He must be here soon. I expect him every day," said Roger, uneasily.

"Do you think your father will be very angry with him?" asked Molly, with as much timidity as if the squire's displeasure might be directed against her.

"I don't know," said Roger. "My mother's illness may alter him; but he didn't easily forgive us formerly. I remember once — but that is nothing to the purpose. I can't help fancying that he has put himself under some strong restraint for my mother's

sake, and that he won't express much. But it doesn't follow that he will forget it. My father is a man of few affections, but what he has are very strong; he feels anything that touches him on these points deeply and permanently. That unlucky valuing of the property! It has given my father the idea of post-obits ——"

"What are they?" asked Molly.

"Raising money to be paid on my father's death, which, of course, involves calculations as to the duration of his life."

"How shocking!" said she.

"I'm as sure as I am of my own life that Osborne never did anything of the kind. But my father expressed his suspicions in language that irritated Osborne; and he doesn't speak out, and won't justify himself even as much as he might; and, much as he loves me, I've but little influence over him, or else he would tell my father all. Well, we must leave it to time," he added, sighing. "My mother would have brought us all right, if she'd been what she once was."

He turned away, leaving Molly very sad. She knew that every member of the family she cared for so much was in trouble, out of which she saw no exit; and her small power of helping them was diminishing day by day as Mrs. Hamley sank more and more under the influence of opiates and stupefying illness. Her father had spoken to her only this very day of the desirableness of her returning home for good. Mrs. Gibson wanted her — for no particular reason, but for many small fragments of reasons. Mrs. Hamley had ceased to want her much, only occasionally appear-

ing to remember her existence. Her position (her father thought — the idea had not entered her head) in a family of which the only woman was an invalid confined to bed, was becoming awkward. But Molly had begged hard to remain two or three days longer — only that — only till Friday. If Mrs. Hamley should want her (she argued, with tears in her eyes), and should hear that she had left the house, she would think her so unkind, so ungrateful!

"My dear child, she's getting past wanting any one! The keenness of earthly feelings is deadened."

"Papa, that is worst of all. I cannot bear it. I won't believe it. She may not ask for me again, and may quite forget me; but I'm sure, to the very last, if the medicines don't stupefy her, she will look round for the squire and her children. For poor Osborne most of all; because he's in sorrow."

"Mr. Gibson shook his head, but said nothing in reply. In a minute or two he asked, —

"I don't like to take you away while you even fancy you can be of use or comfort to one who has been so kind to you; but, if she hasn't wanted you before Friday, will you be convinced, will you come home willingly?"

"If I go then, I may see her once again, even if she hasn't asked for me?" inquired Molly.

"Yes, of course. You must make no noise, no step; but you may go in and see her. I must tell you, I'm almost certain she won't ask for you."

"But she may, papa. I will go home on Friday, if she does not. I think she will."

So Molly hung about the house, trying to do all she could out of the sick-room, for the comfort of

those in it. They only came out for meals, or for necessary business, and found little time for talking to her, so her life was solitary enough, waiting for the call that never came. The evening of the day on which she had had the above conversation with Roger, Osborne arrived. He came straight into the drawing-room, where Molly was seated on the rug, reading by firelight, as she did not like to ring for candles merely for her own use. Osborne came in, with a kind of hurry, which almost made him appear as if he would trip himself up, and fall down. Molly rose. He had not noticed her before; now he came forwards, and took hold of both her hands, leading her into the full flickering light, and straining his eyes to look into her face.

"How is she? You will tell me — you must know the truth! I've travelled day and night since I got your father's letter."

Before she could frame her answer, he had sate down in the nearest chair, covering his eyes with his hand.

"She's very ill," said Molly. "That you know; but I don't think she suffers much pain. She has wanted you sadly."

He groaned aloud. "My father forbade me to come."

"I know!" said Molly, anxious to prevent his self-reproach. "Your brother was away, too. I think no one knew how ill she was — she had been an invalid for so long."

"You know —— Yes! she told you a great deal — she was very fond of you. And God knows how I loved her. If I had not been forbidden to come

home, I should have told her all. Does my father know of my coming now?"

"Yes," said Molly; "I told him papa had sent for you."

Just at that moment the squire came in. He had not heard of Osborne's arrival, and was seeking Molly to ask her to write a letter for him.

Osborne did not stand up when his father entered. He was too much exhausted, too much oppressed by his feelings, and also too much estranged by his father's angry, suspicious letters. If he had come forward with any manifestation of feeling at this moment, everything might have been different. But he waited for his father to see him before he uttered a word. All that the squire said when his eye fell upon him at last was, —

"You here, sir!"

And, breaking off in the directions he was giving to Molly, he abruptly left the room. All the time his heart was yearning after his first-born; but mutual pride kept them asunder. Yet he went straight to the butler, and asked of him when Mr. Osborne had arrived, and how he had come, and if he had had any refreshment — dinner or what — since his arrival?

"For I think I forget everything now!" said the poor squire, putting his hand up to his head. "For the life of me, I can't remember whether we've had dinner or not; these long nights, and all this sorrow and watching, quite bewilder me."

"Perhaps, sir, you will take some dinner with Mr. Osborne. "Mrs. Morgan is sending up his directly. You hardly sate down at dinner-time, sir, you thought my mistress wanted something."

"Ay! I remember now. No! I won't have any

more. Give Mr. Osborne what wine he chooses. Perhaps he can eat and drink." So the squire went away upstairs with bitterness as well as sorrow in his heart.

When lights were brought, Molly was struck with the change in Osborne. He looked haggard and worn; perhaps with travelling and anxiety. Not quite such a dainty gentleman either, as Molly had thought him, when she had last seen him calling on her stepmother, two months before. But she liked him better now. The tone of his remarks pleased her more. He was simpler, and less ashamed of showing his feelings. He asked after Roger in a warm, longing kind of way. Roger was out: he had ridden to Ashcombe to transact some business for the squire. Osborne evidently wished for his return; and hung about restlessly in the drawing-room after he had dined.

"You are sure I may not see her to-night?" he asked Molly, for the third or fourth time.

"No, indeed. I will go up again if you like it. But Mrs. Jones, the nurse Dr. Nicholls sent, is a very decided person. I went up while you were at dinner, and Mrs. Hamley had just taken her drops, and was on no account to be disturbed by seeing any one, much less by any excitement."

Osborne kept walking up and down the long drawing-room, half talking to himself, half to Molly.

"I wish Roger would come. He seems to be the only one to give me a welcome. Does my father always live upstairs in my mother's rooms Miss Gibson?"

"He has done since her last attack. I believe he reproaches himself for not having been enough alarmed before."

"You heard all the words he said to me; they were

not much of a welcome, were they? And my dear mother, who always — whether I was to blame or not ——I suppose Roger is sure to come home to-night?"

"Quite sure."

"You are staying here, are you not? Do you often see my mother, or does this omnipotent nurse keep you out too?"

"Mrs. Hamley hasn't asked for me for three days now, and I don't go into her room unless she asks. I'm leaving on Friday, I believe."

"My mother was very fond of you, I know."

After a while he said, in a voice that had a great deal of sensitive pain in its tone, —

"I suppose — do you know whether she is quite conscious — quite herself?"

"Not always conscious," said Molly, tenderly. "She has to take so many opiates. But she never wanders, only forgets, and sleeps."

"Oh, mother, mother!" said he, stopping suddenly, and hanging over the fire, his hands on the chimney-piece.

When Roger came home, Molly thought it time to retire. Poor girl! it was getting time for her to leave this scene of distress in which she could be of no use. She sobbed herself to sleep this Tuesday night. Two days more, and it would be Friday; and she would have to wrench up the roots she had shot down into this ground. The weather was bright the next morning; and morning and sunny weather cheer up young hearts. Molly sate in the dining-room making tea for the gentlemen as they came down. She could not help hoping that the squire and Osborne might come to a better understanding before she left; for after all,

in the dissension between father and son, lay a bitterer sting than in the illness sent by God. But though they met at the breakfast-table, they purposely avoided addressing each other. Perhaps the natural subject of conversation between the two, at such a time, would have been Osborne's long journey the night before; but he had never spoken of the place he had come from, whether north, south, east, or west, and the squire did not choose to allude to anything that might bring out what his son wished to conceal. Again, there was an unexpressed idea in both their minds that Mrs. Hamley's present illness was much aggravated, if not entirely brought on, by the discovery of Osborne's debts; so, many inquiries and answers on that head were tabooed. In fact, their attempts at easy conversation were limited to local subjects, and principally addressed to Molly or Roger. Such intercourse was not productive of pleasure, or even of friendly feeling, though there was a thin outward surface of politeness and peace. Long before the day was over, Molly wished that she had acceded to her father's proposal, and gone home with him. No one seemed to want her. Mrs. Jones, the nurse, assured her time after time that Mrs. Hamley had never named her name; and her small services in the sick-room were not required since there was a regular nurse; Osborne and Roger seemed all in all to each other; and Molly now felt how much the short conversations she had had with Roger had served to give her something to think about, all during the remainder of her solitary days. Osborne was extremely polite, and even expressed his gratitude to her for her attentions to his mother in a very pleasant manner: but he appeared to be unwilling to show her any of the deeper feelings of his heart,

and almost ashamed of his exhibition of emotion the night before. He spoke to her as any agreeable young man speaks to any pleasant young lady; but Molly almost resented this. It was only the squire who seemed to make her of any account. He gave her letters to write, small bills to reckon up; and she could have kissed his hands for thankfulness.

The last afternoon of her stay at the Hall came. Roger had gone out on the squire's business. Molly went into the garden, thinking over the last summer, when Mrs. Hamley's sofa used to be placed under the old cedar-tree on the lawn, and when the warm air seemed to be scented with roses and sweetbriar. Now, the trees leafless, — there was no sweet odour in the keen frosty air; and looking up at the house, there were the white sheets of blinds, shutting out the pale winter sky from the invalid's room. Then she thought of the day her father had brought her the news of his second marriage: the thicket was tangled with dead weeds and rime and hoar-frost; and the beautiful fine articulations of branches and boughs and delicate twigs were all intertwined in leafless distinctness against the sky. Could she ever be so passionately unhappy again? Was it goodness, or was it numbness, that made her feel as though life was too short to be troubled much about anything? Death seemed the only reality. She had neither energy nor heart to walk far or briskly; and turned back towards the house. The afternoon sun was shining brightly on the windows; and, stirred up to unusual activity by some unknown cause, the housemaids had opened the shutters and windows of the generally unused library. The middle window was also a door; the white-painted

wood went halfway up. Molly turned along the little flag-paved path that led past the library windows to the gate in the white railings at the front of the house, and went in at the opened door. She had had leave given to choose out any books she wished to read, and to take them home with her; and it was just the sort of half-dawdling employment suited to her taste this afternoon. She mounted on the ladder to get to a particular shelf high up in a dark corner of the room; and finding there some volume that looked interesting, she sat down on the step to read part of it. There she sat, in her bonnet and cloak, when Osborne suddenly came in. He did not see her at first; indeed, he seemed in such a hurry that he probably might not have noticed her at all, if she had not spoken.

"Am I in your way? I only came here for a minute to look for some books." She came down the steps as she spoke, still holding the book in her hand.

"Not at all. It is I who am disturbing you. I must just write a letter for the post, and then I shall be gone. Is not this open door too cold for you?"

"Oh, no. It is so fresh and pleasant."

She began to read again, sitting on the lowest step of the ladder; he to write at the large old-fashioned writing-table close to the window. There was a minute or two of profound silence, in which the rapid scratching of Osborne's pen upon the paper was the only sound. Then came a click of the gate, and Roger stood at the open door. His face was towards Osborne, sitting in the light; his back to Molly, crouched up in her corner. He held out a letter, and said in hoarse breathlessness —

"Here's a letter from your wife, Osborne. I went past the post-office and thought——"

Osborne stood up, angry dismay upon his face.

"Roger! what have you done! Don't you see her?"

Roger looked round, and Molly stood up in her corner, red, trembling, miserable, as though she were a guilty person. Roger entered the room. All three seemed to be equally dismayed. Molly was the first to speak; she came forward and said —

"I am so sorry! You didn't wish to hear it, but I couldn't help it. You will trust me, won't you?" and turning to Roger she said to him with tears in her eyes — "Please say you know I shall not tell."

"We can't help it," said Osborne, gloomily. "Only Roger, who knew of what importance it was, ought to have looked round him before speaking."

"So I should," said Roger. "I'm more vexed with myself than you can conceive. Not but what I'm as sure of you as of myself," continued he, turning to Molly.

"Yes; but," said Osborne, "you see how many chances there are that even the best-meaning persons may let out what it is of such consequence to me to keep secret."

"I know you think it so," said Roger.

"Well, don't let us begin that old discussion again — at any rate, before a third person."

Molly had had hard work all this time to keep from crying. Now that she was alluded to as the third person before whom conversation was to be restrained, she said —

"I'm going away. Perhaps I ought not to have

been here. I'm very sorry — very. But I will try and forget what I've heard."

"You can't do that," said Osborne, still ungraciously. "But will you promise me never to speak about it to any one — not even to me, or to Roger? Will you try to act and speak as if you had never heard it? I'm sure, from what Roger has told me about you, that if you give me this promise I may rely upon it."

"Yes; I will promise," said Molly, putting out her hand as a kind of pledge. Osborne took it, but rather as if the action was superfluous. She added, "I think I should have done so, even without a promise. But it is, perhaps, better to bind oneself. I will go away now. I wish I'd never come into this room."

She put down her book on the table very softly, and turned to leave the room, choking down her tears until she was in the solitude of her own chamber. But Roger was at the door before her, holding it open for her, and reading — she felt that he was reading — her face. He held out his hand for hers, and his firm grasp expressed both sympathy and regret for what had occurred.

She could hardly keep back her sobs till she reached her bed-room. Her feelings had been overwrought for some time past, without finding the natural vent in action. The leaving Hamley Hall had seemed so sad before; and now she was troubled with having to bear away a secret which she ought never to have known, and the knowledge of which had brought out a very uncomfortable responsibility. Then there would arise a very natural wonder as to who Osborne's wife was. Molly had not stayed so long and so intimately in the Hamley family without being well aware of the manner

in which the future lady of Hamley was planned for. The squire, for instance, partly in order to show that Osborne, his heir, was above the reach of Molly Gibson, the doctor's daughter, in the early days before he knew Molly well, had often alluded to the grand, the high, and the wealthy marriage which Hamley of Hamley, as represented by his clever, brilliant, handsome son Osborne, might be expected to make. Mrs. Hamley, too, unconsciously on her part, showed the projects that she was constantly devising for the reception of the unknown daughter-in-law that was to be.

"The drawing-room must be refurnished when Osborne marries" — or "Osborne's wife will like to have the west suite of rooms to herself; it will perhaps be a trial to her to live with the old couple; but we must arrange it so that she will feel it as little as possible." — Of course, when Mrs. Osborne comes we must try and give her a new carriage; the old one does well enough for us." — These, and similar speeches had given Molly the impression of the future Mrs. Osborne as of some beautiful grand young lady, whose very presence would make the old Hall into a stately, formal mansion, instead of the pleasant, unceremonious home that it was at present. Osborne, too, who had spoken with such languid criticism to Mrs. Gibson about various country belles, and even in his own home was apt to give himself airs — only at home his airs were poetically fastidious, while with Mrs. Gibson they had been socially fastidious — what unspeakably elegant beauty had he chosen for his wife? Who had satisfied him; and yet satisfying him, had to have her marriage kept in concealment from his parents? At length Molly tore herself up from her wonderings. It was of no use: she

could not find out; she might not even try. The blank wall of her promise blocked up the way. Perhaps it was not even right to wonder, and endeavour to remember slight speeches, casual mentions of a name, so as to piece them together into something coherent. Molly dreaded seeing either of the brothers again; but they all met at dinner-time as if nothing had happened. The squire was taciturn, either from melancholy or displeasure. He had never spoken to Osborne since his return, excepting about the commonest trifles, when intercourse could not be avoided; and his wife's state oppressed him like a heavy cloud coming over the light of his day. Osborne put on an indifferent manner to his father, which Molly felt sure was assumed; but it was not conciliatory for all that. Roger, quiet, steady, and natural, talked more than all the others; but he too was uneasy, and in distress on many accounts. To-day he principally addressed himself to Molly; entering into rather long narrations of late discoveries in natural history, which kept up the current of talk without requiring much reply from any one. Molly had expected Osborne to look something different from usual — conscious, or ashamed, or resentful, or even "married" — but he was exactly the Osborne of the morning — handsome, elegant, languid in manner and in look; cordial with his brother, polite towards her, secretly uneasy at the state of things between his father and himself. She would never have guessed the concealed romance which lay *perdu* under that every-day behaviour. She had always wished to come into direct contact with a love-story: here she had, and she only found it very uncomfortable; there was a sense of concealment and uncertainty about it all; and her honest

straightforward father, her quiet life at Hollingford, which, even with all its drawbacks, was above-board, and where everybody knew what everybody was doing, seemed secure and pleasant in comparison. Of course she felt great pain at quitting the Hall, and at the mute farewell she had taken of her sleeping and unconscious friend. But leaving Mrs. Hamley now was a different thing to what it had been a fortnight ago. Then she was wanted at any moment, and felt herself to be of comfort. Now her very existence seemed forgotten by the poor lady whose body appeared to be living so long after her soul.

She was sent home in the carriage, loaded with true thanks from every one of the family. Osborne ransacked the houses for flowers for her; Roger had chosen her out books of every kind. The squire himself kept shaking her hand, without being able to speak his gratitude, till at last he took her in his arms, and kissed her as he would have done a daughter.

CHAPTER XIX.

Cynthia's Arrival.

MOLLY'S father was not at home when she returned; and there was no one to give her a welcome. Mrs. Gibson was out paying calls, the servants told Molly. She went upstairs to her own room, meaning to unpack and arrange her borrowed books. Rather to her surprise she saw the chamber, corresponding to her own, being dusted; water and towels too were being carried in.

"Is any one coming?" she asked of the housemaid.

"Missus's daughter from France. Miss Kirkpatrick is coming to-morrow."

Was Cynthia coming at last? Oh, what a pleasure it would be to have a companion, a girl, a sister of her own age! Molly's depressed spirits sprang up again with bright elasticity. She longed for Mrs. Gibson's return, to ask her all about it: it must be very sudden, for Mr. Gibson had said nothing of it at the Hall the day before. No quiet reading now; the books were hardly put away with Molly's usual neatness. She went down into the drawing-room, and could not settle to anything. At last Mrs. Gibson came home, tired out with her walk and her heavy velvet cloak. Until that was taken off, and she had rested herself for a few minutes, she seemed quite unable to attend to Molly's questions.

"Oh, yes! Cynthia is coming home to-morrow, by the 'Umpire,' which passes through at ten o'clock. What an oppressive day it is for the time of the year! I really am almost ready to faint. Cynthia heard of some opportunity, I believe, and was only too glad to leave school a fortnight earlier than we planned. She never gave me the chance of writing to say I did, or did not, like her coming so much before the time; and I shall have to pay for her just the same as if she had stopped. And I meant to have asked her to bring me a French bonnet; and then you could have had one made after mine. But I'm very glad she's coming, poor dear."

"Is anything the matter with her?" asked Molly.

"Oh, no! Why should there be?"

"You called her 'poor dear,' and it made me afraid lest she might be ill."

"Oh, no! It's only a way I got into, when Mr. Kirkpatrick died. A fatherless girl — you know one always does call them 'poor dears.' Oh no! Cynthia never is ill. She's as strong as a horse. She never would have felt to-day as I have done. Could you get me a glass of wine and a biscuit, my dear? I'm really quite faint."

Mr. Gibson was much more excited about Cynthia's arrival than her own mother was. He anticipated her coming as a great pleasure to Molly, on whom, in spite of his recent marriage and his new wife, his interests principally centred. He even found time to run upstairs and see the bedrooms of the two girls; for the furniture of which he had paid a pretty round sum.

"Well, I suppose young ladies like their bedrooms

decked out in this way! It's very pretty certainly, but——"

"I liked my own old room better, papa; but perhaps Cynthia is accustomed to such decking up."

"Perhaps; at any rate, she'll see we've tried to make it pretty. Yours is like hers. That's right. It might have hurt her, if hers had been smarter than yours. Now, good-night in your fine flimsy bed."

Molly was up betimes — almost before it was light — arranging her pretty Hamley flowers in Cynthia's room. She could hardly eat her breakfast that morning. She ran upstairs and put on her things, thinking that Mrs. Gibson was quite sure to go down to the "Angel Inn," where the "Umpire" stopped, to meet her daughter after a two years' absence. But, to her surprise, Mrs. Gibson had arranged herself at her great worsted-work frame, just as usual; and she, in her turn, was astonished at Molly's bonnet and cloak.

"Where are you going so early, child? The fog hasn't cleared away yet."

"I thought you would go and meet Cynthia; and I wanted to go with you."

"She will be here in half an hour; and dear papa has told the gardener to take the wheelbarrow down for her luggage. I'm not sure if he is not gone himself."

"Then are not you going?" asked Molly, with a good deal of disappointment.

"No, certainly not. She will be here almost directly. And, besides, I don't like to expose my feelings to every passer-by in High Street. You forget I have not seen her for two years, and I hate scenes in the market-place."

She settled herself to her work again; and Molly, after some consideration, gave up her own grief, and employed herself in looking out of the downstairs window which commanded the approach from the town.

"Here she is — here she is!" she cried out at last. Her father was walking by the side of a tall young lady; William the gardener was wheeling along a great cargo of baggage. Molly flew to the front-door, and had it wide open to admit the new-comer some time before she arrived.

"Well! here she is. Molly, this is Cynthia. Cynthia, Molly. You're to be sisters, you know.

Molly saw the beautiful, tall, swaying figure, against the light of the open door; but could not see any of the features that were, for the moment, in shadow. A sudden gush of shyness had come over her just at the instant, and quenched the embrace she would have given a moment before. But Cynthia took her in her arms, and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Here's mamma," she said, looking beyond Molly on to the stairs where Mrs. Gibson stood, wrapped up in a shawl, and shivering in the cold. She ran past Molly and Mr. Gibson, who rather averted their eyes from this first greeting between mother and child.

Mrs. Gibson said —

"Why, how you are grown, darling! You look quite a woman."

"And so I am," said Cynthia. "I was before I went away; I've hardly grown since, — except, it is always to be hoped, in wisdom."

"Yes! That we will hope," said Mrs. Gibson, in rather a meaning way. Indeed there were evidently hidden allusions in their seeming commonplace speeches.

When they all came into the full light and repose of the drawing-room, Molly was absorbed in the contemplation of Cynthia's beauty. Perhaps her features were not regular; but the changes in her expressive countenance gave one no time to think of that. Her smile was perfect; her pouting charming; the play of the face was in the mouth. Her eyes were beautifully shaped, but their expression hardly seemed to vary. In colouring she was not unlike her mother; only she had not so much of the red-haired tints in her complexion; and her long-shaped, serious grey eyes were fringed with dark lashes, instead of her mother's insipid flaxen ones. Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant. She sate there warming her feet and hands, as much at her ease as if she had been there all her life; not particularly attending to her mother — who, all the time, was studying either her or her dress — measuring Molly and Mr. Gibson with grave observant looks, as if guessing how she should like them.

"There's hot breakfast ready for you in the dining-room, when you are ready for it," said Mr. Gibson. "I'm sure you must want it after your night journey." He looked round at his wife, at Cynthia's mother, but she did not seem inclined to leave the warm room again.

"Molly will take you to your room, darling," said she; "it is near hers, and she has got her things to take off. I'll come down and sit in the dining-room while you are having your breakfast, but I really am afraid of the cold now."

Cynthia rose and followed Molly upstairs.

"I'm so sorry there isn't a fire for you," said Molly, "but — I suppose it wasn't ordered; and, of course,

I don't give any orders. Here is some hot water, though."

"Stop a minute," said Cynthia, getting hold of both Molly's hands, and looking steadily into her face, but in such a manner that she did not dislike the inspection.

"I think I shall like you. I am so glad! I was afraid I should not. We're all in a very awkward position together, aren't we? I like your father's looks, though."

Molly could not help smiling at the way this was said. Cynthia replied to her smile.

"Ah, you may laugh. But I don't know that I am easy to get on with; mamma and I didn't suit when we were last together. But perhaps we are each of us wiser now. Now, please leave me for a quarter of an hour. I don't want anything more."

Molly went into her own room, waiting to show Cynthia down to the dining-room. Not that, in the moderate-sized house, there was any difficulty in finding the way. A very little trouble in conjecturing would enable a stranger to discover any room. But Cynthia had so captivated Molly, that she wanted to devote herself to the new-comer's service. Ever since she had heard of the probability of her having a sister — (she called her a sister, but whether it was a Scotch sister, or a sister *à la mode de Brétagne*, would have puzzled most people) — Molly had allowed her fancy to dwell much on the idea of Cynthia's coming; and in the short time since they had met, Cynthia's unconscious power of fascination had been exercised upon her. Some people have this power. Of course, its effects are only manifested in the susceptible. A school-girl may be found in every

school who attracts and influences all the others, not by her virtues, nor her beauty, nor her sweetness, nor her cleverness, but by something that can neither be described nor reasoned upon. It is the something alluded to in the old lines: —

> Love me not for comely grace,
> For my pleasing eye and face;
> No, nor for my constant heart, —
> For these may change, and turn to ill,
> And thus true love may sever.
> But love me on, and know not why,
> So hast thou the same reason still
> To dote upon me ever.

A woman will have this charm, not only over men but over her own sex; it cannot be defined, or rather it is so delicate a mixture of many gifts and qualities that it is impossible to decide on the proportions of each. Perhaps it is incompatible with very high principle; as its essence seems to consist in the most exquisite power of adaptation to varying people and still more various moods; "being all things to all men." At any rate, Molly might soon have been aware that Cynthia was not remarkable for unflinching morality; but the glamour thrown over her would have prevented Molly from any attempt at penetrating into and judging her companion's character, even had such processes been the least in accordance with her own disposition.

Cynthia was very beautiful, and was so well aware of this fact that she had forgotten to care about it; no one with such loveliness ever appeared so little conscious of it. Molly would watch her perpetually as she went about the room, with the free stately step of some wild animal of the forest — moving almost, as it were,

to the continual sound of music. Her dress, too, though now to our ideas it would be considered ugly and disfiguring, was suited to her complexion and figure, and the fashion of it subdued within due bounds by her exquisite taste. It was inexpensive enough, and the changes in it were but few. Mrs. Gibson professed herself shocked to find that Cynthia had but four gowns, when she might have stocked herself so well, and brought over so many useful French patterns, if she had but patiently waited for her mother's answer to the letter which she had sent, announcing her return by the opportunity madame had found for her. Molly was hurt for Cynthia at all these speeches; she thought they implied that the pleasure which her mother felt in seeing her a fortnight sooner after her two years' absence was inferior to that which she would have received from a bundle of silver-paper patterns. But Cynthia took no apparent notice of the frequent recurrence of these small complaints. Indeed, she received much of what her mother said with a kind of complete indifference, that made Mrs. Gibson hold her rather in awe; and she was much more communicative to Molly than to her own child. With regard to dress, however, Cynthia soon showed that she was her mother's own daughter in the manner in which she could use her deft and nimble fingers. She was a capital workwoman; and, unlike Molly, who excelled in plain sewing, but had no notion of dressmaking or millinery, she could repeat the fashions she had only seen in passing along the streets of Boulogne, with one or two pretty rapid movements of her hands, as she turned and twisted the ribbons and gauze her mother furnished her with. So she refurbished Mrs. Gibson's wardrobe; doing it all in

a sort of contemptuous manner, the source of which Molly could not quite make out.

Day after day the course of these small frivolities was broken in upon by the news Mr. Gibson brought of Mrs. Hamley's nearer approach to death. Molly — very often sitting by Cynthia, and surrounded by ribbon, and wire, and net — heard the bulletins like the toll of a funeral bell at a marriage feast. Her father sympathized with her. It was the loss of a dear friend to him too; but he was so accustomed to death, that it seemed to him but as it was, the natural end of all things human. To Molly, the death of some one she had known so well and loved so much, was a sad and gloomy phenomenon. She loathed the small vanities with which she was surrounded, and would wander out into the frosty garden, and pace the walk, which was both sheltered and concealed by evergreens.

At length — and yet it was not so long, not a fortnight since Molly had left the Hall — the end came. Mrs. Hamley had sunk out of life as gradually as she had sunk out of consciousness and her place in this world. The quiet waves closed over her, and her place knew her no more.

"They all sent their love to you, Molly," said her father. "Roger said he knew how you would feel it."

Mr. Gibson had come in very late, and was having a solitary dinner in the dining-room. Molly was sitting near him to keep him company. Cynthia and her mother were upstairs. The latter was trying on a head-dress which Cynthia had made for her.

Molly remained downstairs after her father had gone out afresh on his final round among his town patients. The fire was growing very low, and the

lights were waning. Cynthia came softly in, and taking Molly's listless hand, that hung down by her side, sat at her feet on the rug, chafing her chilly fingers without speaking. The tender action thawed the tears that had been gathering heavily at Molly's heart, and they came dropping down her cheeks.

"You loved her dearly, did you not, Molly?"

"Yes," sobbed Molly; and then there was a silence.

"Had you known her long?"

"No, not a year. But I had seen a great deal of her. I was almost like a daughter to her; she said so. Yet I never bid her good-by, or anything. Her mind became weak and confused."

"She had only sons, I think?"

"No; only Mr. Osborne and Mr. Roger Hamley. She had a daughter once — 'Fanny.' Sometimes, in her illness, she used to call me 'Fanny.'"

The two girls were silent for some time, both gazing into the fire. Cynthia spoke first: —

"I wish I could love people as you do, Molly!"

"Don't you?" said the other, in surprise.

"No. A good number of people love me, I believe, or at least they think they do; but I never seem to care much for any one. I do believe I love you, little Molly, whom I have only known for ten days, better than any one."

"Not than your mother?" said Molly, in grave astonishment.

"Yes, than my mother!" replied Cynthia, half-smiling. "It's very shocking, I daresay; but it is so. Now, don't go and condemn me. I don't think love for one's mother quite comes by nature; and remember

how much I have been separated from mine! I loved my father, if you will," she continued, with the force of truth in her tone, and then she stopped; "but he died when I was quite a little thing, and no one believes that I remember him. I heard mamma say to a caller, not a fortnight after his funeral, 'Oh, no, Cynthia is too young; she has quite forgotten him' — and I bit my lips, to keep from crying out, 'Papa! papa! have I?' But it's of no use. Well, then mamma had to go out as a governess; she couldn't help it, poor thing! but she didn't much care for parting with me. I was a trouble, I daresay. So I was sent to school at four years old; first one school, and then another; and in the holidays, mamma went to stay at grand houses, and I was generally left with the school-mistresses. Once I went to the Towers; and mamma lectured me continually, and yet I was very naughty, I believe. And so I never went again; and I was very glad of it, for it was a horrid place."

"That it was," said Molly, who remembered her own day of tribulation there.

"And once I went to London, to stay with my uncle Kirkpatrick. He is a lawyer, and getting on now; but then he was poor enough, and had six or seven children. It was winter-time, and we were all shut up in a small house in Doughty Street. But, after all, that wasn't so bad."

"But then you lived with your mother when she began school at Ashcombe. Mr. Preston told me that, when I stayed that day at the Manor-house."

"What did he tell you?" asked Cynthia, almost fiercely.

"Nothing but that. Oh, yes! He praised your beauty, and wanted me to tell you what he had said."

"I should have hated you if you had," said Cynthia.

"Of course I never thought of doing such a thing," replied Molly. "I didn't like him; and Lady Harriet spoke of him the next day, as if he wasn't a person to be liked."

Cynthia was quite silent. At length she said, —

"I wish I was good!"

"So do I," said Molly, simply. She was thinking again of Mrs. Hamley, —

> Only the actions of the just
> Smell sweet and blossom in the dust,

and "goodness" just then seemed to her to be the only endearing thing in the world.

"Nonsense, Molly! You are good. At least, if you're not good, what am I? There's a rule-of-three sum for you to do! But it's no use talking; I am not good, and I never shall be now. Perhaps I might be a heroine still, but I shall never be a good woman, I know."

"Do you think it easier to be a heroine?"

"Yes, as far as one knows of heroines from history. I'm capable of a great jerk, an effort, and then a relaxation — but steady, everyday goodness is beyond me. I must be a moral kangaroo!"

Molly could not follow Cynthia's ideas; she could not distract herself from the thoughts of the sorrowing group at the Hall.

"How I should like to see them all! and yet one can do nothing at such a time! Papa says the funeral

is to be on Tuesday, and that, after that, Roger Hamley is to go back to Cambridge. It will seem as if nothing had happened! I wonder how the squire and Mr. Osborne Hamley will get on together."

"He's the eldest son, is he not? Why shouldn't he and his father get on well together?"

"Oh! I don't know. That is to say, I do know, but I think I ought not to tell."

"Don't be so pedantically truthful, Molly. Besides, your manner shows when you speak truth and when you speak falsehood, without troubling yourself to use words. I knew exactly what your 'I don't know' meant. I never consider myself bound to be truthful, so I beg we may be on equal terms."

Cynthia might well say she did not consider herself bound to be truthful; she literally said what came uppermost, without caring very much whether it was accurate or not. But there was no ill-nature, and, in a general way, no attempt at procuring any advantage for herself in all her deviations; and there was often such a latent sense of fun in them that Molly could not help being amused with them in fact, though she condemned them in theory. Cynthia's playfulness of manner glossed such failings over with a kind of charm; and yet, at times, she was so soft and sympathetic that Molly could not resist her, even when she affirmed the most startling things. The little account she made of her own beauty pleased Mr. Gibson extremely; and her pretty deference to him won his heart. She was restless too, till she had attacked Molly's dress, after she had remodelled her mother's.

"Now for you, sweet one," said she as she began

upon one of Molly's gowns. "I've been working as connoisseur until now. Now I begin as amateur."

She brought down her pretty artificial flowers, plucked out of her own best bonnet to put into Molly's, saying they would suit her complexion, and that a knot of ribbons would do well enough for her. All the time she worked, she sang; she had a sweet voice in singing, as well as in speaking, and used to run up and down her gay French *chansons* without any difficulty; so flexible in the art was she. Yet she did not seem to care for music. She rarely touched the piano on which Molly practised with daily conscientiousness. Cynthia was always willing to answer questions about her previous life, though, after the first, she rarely alluded to it of herself: but she was a most sympathetic listener to all Molly's innocent confidences of joys and sorrows: sympathizing even to the extent of wondering how she could endure Mr. Gibson's second marriage, and why she did not take some active steps of rebellion.

In spite of all this agreeable and pungent variety of companionship at home, Molly yearned after the Hamleys. If there had been a woman in that family she would probably have received many little notes, and heard numerous details which were now lost to her, or summed up in condensed accounts of her father's visits at the Hall, which, since his dear patient was dead, were only occasional.

"Yes! The squire is a good deal changed; but he's better than he was. There's an unspoken estrangement between him and Osborne; one can see it in the silence and constraint of their manners; but outwardly they are friendly — civil at any rate. The squire will

always respect Osborne as his heir, and the future representative of the family. Osborne doesn't look well; he says he wants change. I think he's weary of the domestic tête-à-tête, or domestic dissension. But he feels his mother's death acutely. It's a wonder that he and his father are not drawn together by their common loss. Roger's away at Cambridge too — examination for the mathematical tripos. Altogether the aspect of both people and place is changed; it is but natural!"

Such is perhaps the summing-up of the news of the Hamleys, as contained in many bulletins. They always ended in some kind message to Molly.

Mrs. Gibson generally said, as a comment upon her husband's account of Osborne's melancholy, —

"My dear! why don't you ask him to dinner here? A little quiet dinner, you know. Cook is quite up to it; and we would all of us wear blacks and lilacs; he couldn't consider that as gaiety."

Mr. Gibson took no more notice of these suggestions than by shaking his head. He had grown accustomed to his wife by this time, and regarded silence on his own part as a great preservative against long inconsequential arguments. But every time that Mrs. Gibson was struck by Cynthia's beauty, she thought it more and more advisable that Mr. Osborne Hamley should be cheered up by a quiet little dinner-party. As yet no one but the ladies of Hollingford and Mr. Ashton, the vicar — that hopeless and impracticable old bachelor — had seen Cynthia; and what was the good of having a lovely daughter, if there were none but old women to admire her?

Cynthia herself appeared extremely indifferent upon

the subject, and took very little notice of her mother's constant talk about the gaieties that were possible, and the gaieties that were impossible, in Hollingford. She exerted herself just as much to charm the two Miss Brownings as she would have done to delight Osborne Hamley, or any other young heir. That is to say, she used no exertion, but simply followed her own nature, which was to attract every one of those she was thrown amongst. The exertion seemed rather to be to refrain from doing so, and to protest, as she so often did, by slight words and expressive looks against her mother's words and humours — alike against her folly and her caresses. Molly was almost sorry for Mrs. Gibson, who seemed so unable to gain influence over her child. One day Cynthia read Molly's thought.

"I am not good, and I told you so. Somehow, I cannot forgive her for her neglect of me as a child, when I would have clung to her. Besides, I hardly ever heard from her when I was at school. And I know she put a stop to my coming over to her wedding. I saw the letter she wrote to Madame Lefebre. A child should be brought up with its parents, if it is to think them infallible when it grows up."

"But though it may know that there must be faults," replied Molly, "it ought to cover them over and try to forget their existence."

"It ought. But don't you see I have grown up outside the pale of duty and 'oughts.' Love me as I am, sweet one, for I shall never be better."

END OF VOL. I.

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